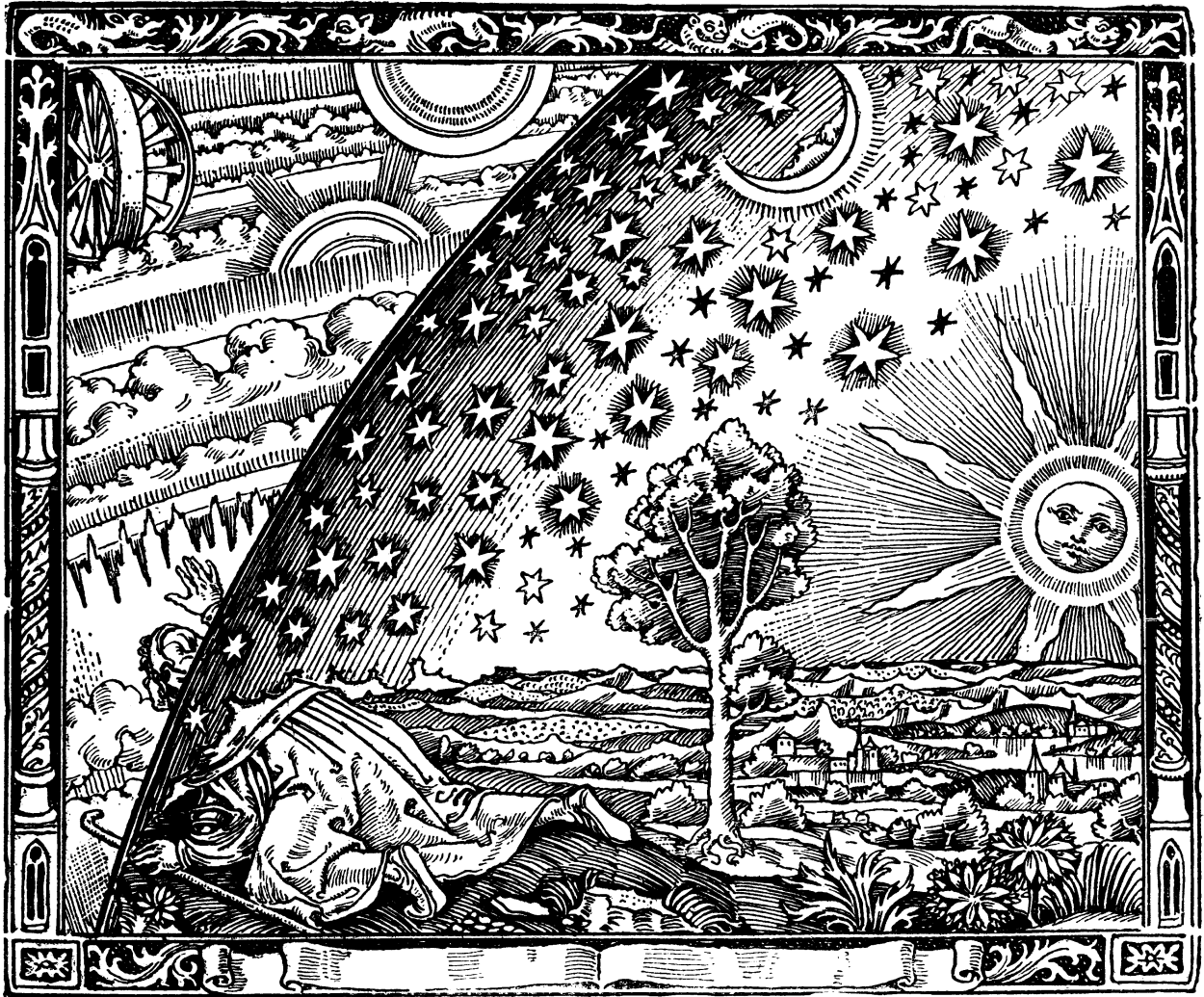


# Composition and Decomposition



**Essays by John Moore**



JOHN MOORE (1957–2002) was an anarchist poet. He wrote extensively on contemporary anarchist theory in publications such as *Green Anarchist*, *Social Anarchism*, and *Anarchist Studies* and was the author of several books, including *Anarchy and Ecstasy* and *Book of Levelling*. Until his death, he was regarded as one of the most eclectic and innovative anarchist thinkers around, and he did much to introduce a new generation to writings by Fredy Perlman, Max Stirner, the Situationist International and many other marginalised libertarian thinkers.

Edited by Lou J. and J. Purkis

*For A!*

'Festive turbulence and convulsive harmony': the beautiful return of an anarchist visionary; or, John Moore: an introduction by Jonathan Purkis	8
Kenneth Rexroth: Poetry, Politics and Mysticism (Review Article, Vol. 1, No. 2, Autumn 1993)	13
Images and Anarchism (Review Article: Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 1995)	17
Visions of Poesy: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Anarchist Poetry (Book Review, Volume 4, Number 2, October 1996)	21
<i>Prolegomena to a Study of the Return of the Repressed in History</i> (Booknote, Volume 5, Number 1, March 1997)	25
Anarchism and Poststructuralism (Review Article, Volume 5, Number 2, October 1997)	27
Composition and Decomposition: Contemporary Anarchist Aesthetics (Volume 6, Number 2, October 1998)	35
<i>September Commando: Gestures of Futility and Frustration</i> (Booknote, Volume 6, Number 1, March 1998)	51
Anarchy after Leftism (Booknote, Volume 6, Number 2, October 1998)	52
Anarchy: Free Fall (Editorial Introduction, Volume 7, Number 2, October 1999)	55
The Living Theatre: Art, Exile and Outrage (Booknote, Volume 8, Number 1, March 2000)	59
All Nietzscheans Now? (Review Article, Volume 9, Number 1, March 2001)	62
The Insubordination of Words: Poetry, Insurgency and the Situationists (Volume 10, Number 2)	67
1. ART.....	67
2. POETRY.....	75
FESTIVE TURBULENCE (Volume 11, Number 1, 2003)	88

**Review Article: Kenneth Rexroth: Poetry, Politics and Mysticism**

(Volume 1, Number 2, Autumn 1993)

**Review Article: Images and Anarchism**

(Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 1995)

**Book Review: *Visions of Poesy***

(Volume 4, Number 2, October 1996)

**Book Review: *Dreamer's Paradise Lost: Louis C. Fraina/Lewis Corey (1892-1953) and the Decline of Radicalism in the United States***

(Volume 4, Number 2, October 1996)

**Booknote: *Prolegomena to a Study of the Return of the Repressed in History***

(Volume 5, Number 1, March 1997)

**Review Article: Anarchism and Poststructuralism**

(Volume 5, Number 2, October 1997)

**Composition and Decomposition: Contemporary Anarchist Aesthetics**

(Volume 6, Number 2, October 1998)

**Booknote: *September Commando***

(Volume 6, Number 1, March 1998)

**Booknote: *Bob Black's Anarchy after Leftism***

(Volume 6, Number 2, October 1998)

**Editorial Introduction: Anarchy: Free Fall**

(Volume 7, Number 2, October 1999)

**Booknote: *The Living Theatre: Art, Exile and Outrage***

(Volume 8, Number 1, March 2000)

**Review Article: All Nietzscheans Now?**

(Volume 9, Number 1, March 2001)

**The Insubordination of Words: Poetry, Insurgency and the Situationists**  
(Volume 10, Number 2)

**Festival Turbulence (A Celebration of the Tenth Anniversary of *Anarchist Studies*)**  
(Volume 11, Number 1, 2003)



**‘Festive turbulence and convulsive harmony’: the beautiful return of an anarchist visionary [1] or, John Moore: an introduction** by Jonathan Purkis

Seeing the words ‘John Moore’ on the cover of a new book is quite a moment. In the last two decades, any mention of my former colleague and friend in print has been a bonus after the emptiness of losing him so young, but these have been scant references, footnotes really. I’d began to think that as a writer and theorist who eluded categorization he was vulnerable to being forgotten. The gathering of all his major pieces in one *festschrift* of a collection *Anarchist Speculations* in 2016 was unexpected, joyful and a testimony to the truth that if one’s voice is authentic and heartfelt, the words will find a way eventually. Finally, after years of being sidelined, dismissed, even derided by the gate keepers of particular traditions and networks, he was ‘coming home’. Let the primal dance begin!

I sat and thought about the many Anarchist Research Group (ARG) meetings we’d attended, the Anarchist Bookfairs, the two journals and two anthologies we had done work together on, and the times when I’d heard him perform his wild and surreal poetry. But there was something more than just remembering the warmth of those occasions where I’d felt the benefit of his energy, wisdom and wit, it was the sense that I’d been deprived of a way of looking at the world – as though someone had stolen my spectacles.

Some things are easy to explain. We know why John slipped through the epistemological cracks. He never had a firm foothold or big name status in any field of anarchist (or any other) thought; his ideas were interdisciplinary, artistic, fluid, ontological and evoked spirituality; he embraced unpopular traditions such as primitivism; he rarely wrote to please an audience (either in the UK or the USA); he rubbed up against and riled a few intellectual giants (though was always pretty respectful);

he sometimes changed his mind (on Max Stirner certainly) and, perhaps most significantly, much of his work was challenging and/or strange. At the time of his sudden terrible death, on a pavement in Luton on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2002, he had very few advocates.

Now he has. Those who have stayed the course, or discovered him through the first edition of this book, will be pleased to know that more material is emerging all the time, much of it from the *Bulletin of Anarchist Research*, a Tom Cahill-initiated montage of academic news, letters and analysis which ran from the mid 1980s until it morphed into *Anarchist Studies* in 1993.

Explaining John's appeal is tricky. There are of course 'many Moores', but all linked by a voracious appetite for transgressive thinking, even when he's just summarising other people's work. You can feel that restlessness and impatience with some parts of the classic anarchist tradition in the choice of his review subject matter[2] for the *Bulletin* – diving into the world of Starhawk (Dreaming the Dark, Truth or Dare and The Spiral Dance), Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor's The Great Cosmic Mother and books by or about Fredy Perlman (whose *Against His-tory; Against Leviathan* was the single biggest influence on his writings). Mindful of his unconventional interests and unorthodox methods of intellectual enquiry, each of these assessments came with their own 'relevance to anarchism' caveat for uncertain readers.

What his methods were is hard to summarise. He was certainly doing something more than following Chomsky's observation that anarchism is a tendency in human history and then going in search of unusual representatives of it. For Moore, anarchy is as much about a way of being, and without fully appreciating the forces that shape it, one loses sight of the project of revolution. Every aspect of the totality is to be inspected and challenged with processes as radical in form as in content – echoing the maxim that in anarchist ethics the means should equate with its ends. This explains his explorations of Nietzsche, the nod towards Kristeva, the

endorsement of the Situationists and his thinking behind the critique of Todd May's claims for a historically distinct poststructuralist anarchism.

Those who dip into John Moore will pick the theory of the method up quite quickly. How it is delivered in practice requires more effort on the reader – it's more elusive, intuitive and unusual. He calls the process, used in *Anarchy and Ecstasy*, 'metafactual', drawing on the literary tradition of metafiction, which reflects upon the method of creating a text. By introducing new characters, situations, intertextual references and thematic disruption, a dominant narrative can be reworked to draw attention to its ideological construction. He does this with the folk tale of Little Red Riding Hood (in *Lovebite*) and in 'An Archaeology of the Future: On Narrative and Cultural Transformation'. [3]

Here he's talking quite rhetorically and in essay mode about the relationship that people have to land and the notion of 'lore' and how Leviathan kills these local organic cultures. One's attention drifts – it's familiar stuff – then everything suddenly segues into this spine tingling lyrical passage about the cultural role of the banshee. He sits us down by the fire, nursing our bruised civilisation-wounded bodies, encouraging us to mourn the loss of the Earth, our mothers, our spirit. It's wild enchanting writing with the banshee manifesting itself through the text tracking our sadness and dislocation. We've seen this technique a little in that opening 'poem' from *A Book of Levelling* (with its evocation of Valerie Solanas' SCUM manifesto!), and in one (lost?) text that I heard him perform, about a man who woke up – Gregor Samsa fashion – with his body covered in vaginas!

Metafactual methods certainly befit an era of post-truth and no doubt John would have had much to say about contemporary debates about the body and gender. Whichever 'Moore' you are reading, there is a sense of the visionary, of constant questioning – questioning aspects of the Enlightenment whilst still being rooted in anarchist formulations of it. Not surprising then, that for the cover illustration of *Anarchy and Ecstasy* he

opts for a much used portrayal of medieval cosmology, with an inquisitive figure poking his head through the roof of the sky to look at the wider universe beyond. It's meant to symbolise the explorer, the astronomer, the heretic – the paradigm shifter – and often accompanies articles about Nicholas Copernicus or Giordano Bruno. [4]

So, it grieves me that some reviewers have taken his last pieces to be a postmodern capitulation to textual signification as resistance. It's not only wrong intellectually – all of his work is concerned with the politics and forms of language – it just happened to be what he was working on when he died. Sometimes the journey of course does turn inwards, but my reading of 'Lived Poetry' (written late 2001/early 2002) is that it was concerned with extrapolating from language and radical cultural forms into alternative ways of living – advocating new epistemologies to suit it.

In the introduction to *Anarchist Speculations* Aragorn! suggests that he would place Moore amongst John Zerzan, Bob Black and Hakim Bey as the finest second wave anarchist writers. Whilst he doesn't have the hard hitting classic stand out text, for me he's the better scholar and a more inventive writer. To all his detractors then and now, consider this: just look at the diversity of his language, the timbre of the different modes of address, the ability to shape shift syntax and semiotics! He can play post structuralist conceptual bingo along with the best of them, yet explain in clear sentences – as he did in *Public Secret* – about the relative limits of revolutionary form and content. And he would still be there at the end of the day to offer a few words of support for your latest projects with a twinkle in his eye.

No, I prefer to think of the work of John Moore as an elusive magical cloak of anti-authoritarian energy that has been borrowed from a learned restless voyager. It hangs there in the hallway and with it around our shoulders we have permission to dream of *becoming*, to discover the wilderness inside us, to tell different stories or find ways of dancing the Leviathan to sleep. It is utterly inspirational that a marginal almost

forgotten figure of anarchism such as John Moore still warms hearts, turns pages, picks up pens, brings people together and lights up the synapses of the anarchist imagination in 2022. That's lived poetry for you!

[1] These are lines from a poem 'Festive Turbulence' that John wrote to celebrate the 10th anniversary of *Anarchist Studies*. See vol 11 (1) 2003 p. 91.

[2] He describes his research interests as 'Contemporary anarchism (especially USA)', Visionary and 'New Ranter' writings, Anarchy and Spirituality, 'Neo-Primitivism'. *Bulletin of Anarchist Research*, September 1988 No 14, p. 5.

[3] *Bulletin of Anarchist Research*, 25 Autumn 1991, p 5-8.

[4] He used the same picture for the Special Edition of *Anarchist Studies* on Science Fiction.

**Kenneth Rexroth: Poetry, Politics and Mysticism** (Review Article, Vol. 1, No. 2, Autumn 1993)

*The Relevance of Rexroth*

Ken Knabb

Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1990

ISBN 0-9396S2-00-2 \$5.00; 86pp.

Books with words like ‘relevance’ in their titles always seem suspicious. One invariably wants to ask: relevant to whom or what? There is always the suspicion that a text or author is being put to use in some kind of utilitarian or instrumentalist fashion. Fortunately, in the present instance this suspicion remains unfounded. Ken Knabb, probably best known as editor and translator of the huge *Situationist International Anthology*, has written a useful primer for anyone unacquainted with Kenneth Rexroth’s work or interested in situating it within a broad sociocultural and ideological context. As an appropriation of Rexroth for anarchism, Knabb’s critical appreciation of this neglected but important American writer bears favourable comparison with other texts, such as Peter Marshall’s *William Blake: Visionary Anarchist*, which attempts to reclaim certain figures as part of an anarchist ‘tradition’. Admittedly, Rexroth’s avowed anarchist stance makes this act of appropriation easier, but Knabb’s critical engagement with his subject’s textual productions, combined with a refusal to force Rexroth into an inappropriate mould, makes this reclamation not only less tendentious, but also entirely plausible.

The text is divided into three chapters with self-explanatory titles. ‘Life and Literature’ briefly surveys Rexroth’s biography, outlines the thematic and generic range of his writing, and adumbrates his opinions on literature. ‘Magnanimity and Mysticism’ examines the significance of Rexroth’s spirituality, focusing particularly on his interests in Buddhism and other Eastern doctrines. ‘Society and Revolution’ explores Rexroth’s social ideology, principally considering his advocacy of and participation in social and cultural anarchism.

Given his political science orientation, it hardly remains surprising that Knabb appears most comfortable in discussing Rexroth's politics. The discussion of spirituality in the intermediate chapter remains worthwhile, although it tends toward vagueness on occasion. But the treatment of Rexroth's writing in the opening chapter remains the weakest part of the book, and this is disappointing given that Rexroth was primarily a man of letters, not a political or religious thinker.

Knabb's difficulties with Rexroth's literary productions are twofold, but derive from a common failure to understand the ways in which ideology functions in literary discourse. On the one hand, Knabb applies a rather naive reading strategy to Rexroth's work, indicating for example that 'most of his poems are pretty straightforward and need little or no explication' (p. 6). This remark is immediately belied by a reading of a Rexroth poem which notices only the ostensible, surface meaning of the text, and hence misses the connotative elements of the poet's rhetorical intent. Later, considering Rexroth's literary criticism, Knabb comments: 'If he discusses a poet's prosody, it is not a mere academic exercise: he will show how it reflects a way of looking at things, a response to life' (p. 17). Unfortunately, however, Knabb does not follow his subject's lead: he does not discuss Rexroth's prosody or aesthetics, let alone the connection between his stylistics and his ideology.

On the other hand, Knabb fails to tackle the ideological contradictions in Rexroth's own critical practice. Toward the end of chapter one, many examples are given of Rexroth's aptitude for providing social interpretations of literary texts. Only a few pages later, however, Knabb allows Rexroth to propose a supposedly 'universalist' reading of literature as a source of enduring moral values, rather than as a site for the struggle of contending discursive forces. This latter theme echoes throughout the text, where Knabb fails to interrogate Rexroth's frequently iterated claim that his work engages with 'real' issues, the constitutive elements of the human condition, rather than with the extraneous and ephemeral topics explored by many of his contemporaries. Attention needs to be drawn to the fact that these emphases – or 'universal' readings, on the human condition, and on what Adorno calls the jargon of authenticity – are

primary constituents of bourgeois humanist ideology, and remain in conflict with the socially-oriented literary hermeneutics within Rexroth's critical discourse.

Aside from their intrinsic significance, Knabb's problems with his subject's literary productions are important because they leak into the consideration of Rexroth's politics. For the most part, Knabb remains rigorously fair in appraising the strengths and weaknesses of Rexroth's political position. In terms of his ideological shortcomings, emphasis falls on Rexroth's anti-theoretical tendencies and the limitations these place on the development of a 'coherent libertarian perspective' (p. 62). Knabb rightly balks at Rexroth's notion that poems and song lyrics which 'communicate genuine personal vision' (p. 69) contain a subversive charge unamenable to co-optation. But he positively bridles when Rexroth asserts that the real achievement of the events of May 1968 occurred when 'People sang songs that attacked the evil at its source by presenting an alternative kind of human being' (p. 71), compared to which events on the street were transitory and relatively unimportant. Knabb's response is vehement:

A few poems and songs may have had a significant influence, but for the most part they were diluted and belated reflections of the adventures that were really going on ... There was more poetry in the act of taking over the Odeon than in whatever songs may have been sung there. In a situation like May 1968, where millions of people have been shaken out of their usual sleepwalking existence and are getting a taste of real life, the point is no longer to 'present' visions of alternative human relations, but to fulfil them. (pp. 70, 72)

This passage reveals the reasons for Knabb's resistance to Rexroth's 'case for the subversiveness of art' (p. 73), and also indicates why he earlier failed to challenge Rexroth's jargon of authenticity. Knabb polarizes 'real life' and its pale reflection, 'art' – and in doing so proposes the crude reflection model of art as unproblematically capable of mirroring material reality. Failing to recognize the coded nature of both 'real life' and 'art',

Knabb valorizes the former above the latter, but this only allows him to resurrect the Situationist cliché about the poetry of the act. This fetishization of supposedly uncoded (spontaneous/untheorized/nonspectacularized) activity leads inevitably into a reiteration of tired Debordian theses about the Spectacle. In this distastefully élitist schema, most people are cast as ‘addicts of passive consumption’, living out ‘their usual sleepwalking existence’ (p. 72), stupefied by the Spectacle until the Situationist vanguard arrives to liberate them. Almost invariably co-opted, art is little more than an anodyne, and can hardly embody subversive energies. This conception of a unified, monolithic Spectacle negates the possibilities for resistance available to resistant and writerly readers, who read against the grain of texts to produce subversive interpretations. Once again, the shortcomings in Knabb’s reading strategies – a product of the ideological limitations of the Situationist perspective – result in a failure to engage fully with Rexroth’s textual productions.

This review, it transpires, has largely concentrated on the negative aspects of *The Relevance of Rexroth*. This is unfair. Knabb refers to Rexroth’s ‘engaging style’, ‘breadth of vision’, and ‘fresh perspective’ (p. 16), and these elements are skilfully conveyed in this text. Rexroth emerges as refreshingly free from dogma and possessing an impressive breadth of interests. Knabb’s book is valuable for many reasons, not least for introducing a writer with these qualities to an anarchist readership all too often characterized by a narrow philistinism. Knabb suggests that he wrote *The Relevance of Rexroth* for two reasons: ‘I wanted to sort out for myself what I found valuable and what I disagreed with in a writer who has meant a lot to me; and I wanted to interest other people in reading him. I hope I succeed at least in the latter.’ (p. 5.) Knabb should have no fears on that last count.

John Moore  
Thames Valley University

**Images and Anarchism** (Review Article: Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 1995)

*Ecstatic Incisions: The Collages of Freddie Baer*

Freddie Baer

Stirling: AK Press, 1992

ISBN 1-87731776-60-0 (PB) £7.95; 73 pp.

*All Cotton Briefs* (Expanded Edition)

M. Kasper

Brooklyn; Benzene, 1992

ISBN 0-939194-05-8 (PB) \$7.95; 48 pp.

Of the two texts, *All Cotton Briefs* deserves the least attention. Described in the cover blurb as ‘A collection of illustrated short prose ... experimental cartoons ... anecdotes, parodies, and rants... hand-lettered, with accompanying collages and drawings’, Kasper’s text is essentially a leftist coffee-table book, rather like Glen Baxter with a political conscience. Employing a low-key surrealist sense of the absurd, and picking soft targets (e.g., bureaucracy, senators, profiteering, Christianity), there is little here that would be ideologically inappropriate in mainstream left-liberal publications such as *The Nation* or *The New Statesman*. As a ranter, Kasper lacks the verve, the punk anger and fervid outrage, characteristic of contemporaries such as Bob Black, Ed Lawrence, and Gerry Reith.

*Ecstatic Incisions* is another case altogether, although it too contains problematic elements. While Kasper’s work has occasionally appeared in the American anarchist press, readers should be more familiar with Baer’s collages from *Fifth Estate*, *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* and elsewhere. This collection, however, draws together Baer’s work not merely from periodicals, but from T-shirts, posters and album sleeves, and thus allows an initial assessment of the productions of an artist who explicitly situates herself within the anarchist tradition.

Frequently operating on the impossible but necessary—indeed, delirious—interface between anarchism and science fiction (a literary genre regarded as ‘liberatory’ [p. 9]), Baer’s work can most appropriately be characterized as utopian fantasy. This type of cultural production, by drawing on a range of materials from the realm of the fantastic, estranges readers/viewers from their current condition of psychosocial repression and opens up vistas of fulfillment in possible futures. Envisioning an alternative society of the future, utopian fantasy generates what Ernst Bloch terms a ‘dreaming ahead,’ an act capable of revolutionary awareness and entering into the activity of history.

But to fulfil its subversive potential, the act of dreaming ahead must effect a breach in the wall surrounding the control complex – i.e., in the signifying systems delimiting and policing the discursive perimeters of power. The perspective afforded by the breach prompts an insurrectionary irruption, a freeing of semiotic flows that propel the subject-in-process on a quest for utopian *jouissance*. In short, an opening, a vision of an alternative future, can only occur when the codes are scrambled, when the dominant sign systems are disrupted, and an errant message, an intimation of life lived freely beyond the bounds, can be engendered.

Baer’s work attempts to fulfil the requirements of utopian fantasy, but (at least for this reader) unfortunately rarely succeeds. Only ‘Dream Machine’ (p. 34) – a pictorial equivalent of Samuel R. Delany’s magnificent speculative fiction – incorporates sufficiently ambivalent visual signifiers to produce a semiotic breakthrough. Baer invites the reader to ‘look beyond the method and see my message’ (p. 9), but all too often the message remains trapped, contained within the dominant binary oppositions of Western civilization. In the iconic register, many of Baer’s collages polarize the following codings: positive/female/organic/corporeal/liberating/‘primitive’ versus negative/male/mechanical/cerebral/repressive/civilized. Such codings, far from challenging, actually reinforce hegemonic sign systems. Rather than promoting utopian openings, these codings prompt closure within the dominant discursive order (or at least its more liberal/feminist formations). Deconstructing these polarities remains a relatively easy task.

In the interview preceding the art-work, Baer emphasises the feminist origins of and influences on her ideological position. She also indicates that her productions are determined by available resources: ‘With collage I can’t always follow my original vision – I have to go where the pieces lead’ (p. 8). Given the determinant role played by resources, it remains significant that the vast majority of the images used in Baer’s collages are culled from the Dover Pictorial Archive series of nineteenth century engravings and line-drawings. The use of such resources has pronounced effects on the representation of women in Baer’s artwork. Women tend to be reduced to a number of (stereo)types: the angel or classical figure; the Victorian bourgeois woman; the pensive romantic maiden; and the exotic (*vide*, Western imperialist romanticizations of women from the Middle East, the Orient, the Pacific, and gypsies). These images are frequently positivized in Baer’s work by juxtaposition with conventional symbols of female sexuality (e.g., flowers, sea anemones) and the fantastic (usually images of flight—the winged beast or woman—as signifiers of metamorphosis). This image cluster acquires significance through polarization with a set of negativized male-coded images of abstraction, geometry, cartography, horology, and the machine. These symbols of patriarchal order are either represented as invasive—displacing, regulating and mechanizing the (previously autonomous) female—or as impinged upon by a renascent female otherness, a return of the repressed coded as the excluded, outside forces of the unconscious, female libido, and Nature. But Baer’s anarchafeminist ideational structure remains compromised by the images chosen to represent resistance and opposition. The images of women utilized in the collages are *products* of the patriarchal order, not signifiers of its excluded Other. As a result, the dominant signifying systems are not contested, but sustained: rather than a tantalizing glimpse of the regions outside or beyond the control zone, readers are subject to further enclosure.

As the title of her text indicates, Freddie Baer is an artist who seeks her *jouissance*, her ecstasy, through wielding the castrating scissors as well as appropriating the phallogentric piercing power for herself. (The fact that the framing material to this volume, plus all the collaborative work

collected here – with the possible exception of the text by T. Fulano – was produced by or in conjunction with men suggests that the patriarchal order, not the masculine *per se*, remains the target of Baer's ire.) But to open slits, to cut openings, to create scissions in an increasingly straitjacketed social fabric, a further whetting – of appetite and artistic tools – remains necessary.

JOHN MOORE  
UNIVERSITY OF LUTON

***Visions of Poesy: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Anarchist Poetry***  
(Book Review, Volume 4, Number 2, October 1996)

Clifford Harper, Dennis Gould and Jeff Cloves (editors)

London: Freedom Press, 1994

ISBN 0-900384-75-1, £8.00. 196 pp.

As the only anthology of twentieth century anarchist poetry, this is a landmark text. Its historical significance should not be missed. While other radical strands such as feminism and marxism acknowledge their cultural traditions, anarchism often ignores its artistic dimensions, or automatically repeats situationist clichés about the suppression and realization of art. But this volume places an aspect of anarchist culture – anarchist poetry – firmly on the map. For the first time, anarchists can begin to identify a living tradition of anarchist cultural creativity, can recognise a tradition of anarchist poetry. In this sense, *Visions of Poesy* contributes to the contemporary renaissance of cultural anarchism, perhaps most visible elsewhere in the anarchist cultural archaeology of the important US journal, *Drunken Boat*.

This isn't to suggest, however, that there aren't problematic elements to this text. The major issue remains the status of the term 'anarchist' in the subtitle. In his Introduction, Clifford Harper states: 'All of the poets in this book are, or were, anarchists ... within this book we have only included the poetry of those who regard themselves as anarchists.' And yet because the term 'anarchist' is never defined, the criteria used to justify inclusion remains unclear, and this leads to the anthologisation of individuals who are not anarchists in any sense of the term known to this reviewer.

Harper quite rightly asserts that the editors do not 'wish to be the arbiters of what is or isn't anarchist poetry.' But clearly some parameters have to be set, not only in terms of what 'anarchist' designates, but also as regards the defining characteristics of anarchist *poetry*. Diversity might seem an appropriate value for anarchist cultural creativity. But the question raised repeatedly by this volume is: What makes a poem anarchist? Perhaps an anthology is an inappropriate forum in which to

stage such a discussion, but the fact remains that this issue is never resolved. This has important implications in that certain poems included here, if presented in other contexts, would not be recognised as anarchist, and the status of such works as anarchist clearly thus remains moot.

In terms of quality, the inclusions in the anthology are, as might be expected, widely varying, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. At one extreme, there are the genuine achievements of poets such as Kenneth Patchen, Kenneth Rexroth and (above all) Diane Di Prima; at the other, there are the poetaster purveyors of doggerel and typographically-arranged prosaicisms. Most contributions fall somewhere between the two. In terms of tone, the poems range from the lyrical to the didactic, with the best avoiding both subjective introspection and overt tendentiousness.

The text deliberately consists only of poetry written in the English language, although in practice this means that contributions are overwhelmingly either British or North American in origin. This results in a rather unfortunate Eurocentric – not to say Anglo-Saxon – orientation, reinforced by the fact that (as far as can be determined) all contributors are white – thus reiterating the traditional anarchist blind-spot of ethnicity.

Despite the dreadful title, I'm looking forward to the second volume promised by the editors.

JOHN MOORE  
UNIVERSITY OF LUTON

***Dreamer's Paradise Lost: Louis C. Fraina/Lewis Corey (1892-1953)  
and the Decline of Radicalism in the United States***

Paul M. Buhle

Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995

ISBN 0-391-03849-4. x + 183pp.

The tenor of this book, and in a sense of Buhle's stance as a whole, is reflected in its title. The text is a lament for lost possibilities and the failure of radicalism – for which read, the Left – in the United States during the twentieth century. In the present instance, Buhle uses Fraina/Corey as a case-study of political decline.

Buhle has written a fine intellectual biography of a relatively neglected figure on the American Left, but one that depressingly tells the familiar tale of descent into ideological conformity. The text traces Fraina's political shifts from a semisyndicalist version of socialism, through communism, then democratic socialism, and on to liberal reformism with an occasional conservative edge. But rather than such a straightforward linear journey from Left to centre, Buhle reveals Fraina as a contradictory character whose ideological perspectives – right up until his death – could always take unexpected lurches or loops back to earlier stages of thought.

Buhle rightly identifies the 1910s as Fraina's most creative period, a time during which he attempted to synthesise cultural analyses of modernity with radical sociopolitical theory. But then, as with so many figures on the Left, the disaster of the Bolshevik dictatorship results in increasing ideological stultification and a stymieing of creativity. And in retrospect, once this trajectory is commenced, all that follows has an air of inevitability about it. Buhle's examination of the intersections between the avant-garde and social radicalism is valuable, but so much of the remainder of Fraina's career comprises dreary manoeuvring among multitudes of political parties, unions and committees, that the reader is left with the impression that if this is radicalism, then its decline is something to celebrate, not lament. Fraina's moment of promise remains so brief and his deterioration so prolonged, that the former is all but eclipsed by the latter.

Thoroughly researched and well narrated, this text is a vital contribution to scholarship on the history of the American Left. Anarchist readers, however, may well be left with a sense of frustration and relief. The frustration will emerge from the failure to account for the prestige of the Bolshevik coup d'état among Western intellectual-activists such as Fraina during the interwar period. How and why did American radicals insulate themselves from anarchist critiques, such as those articulated by Goldman and Berkman? The relief will derive from the fact that contemporary anarchism is increasingly defining itself as distinct from the Left and its sordid legacy of power-seeking *realpolitik*. If there is a lesson to be drawn from Fraina, as from a figure such as Sorel, it is that the transitions from Marxism/syndicalism to liberalism, conservatism and even fascism are disquietingly easy, precisely because such ideologies of power have so much in common.

JOHN MOORE  
UNIVERSITY OF LUTON

***Prolegomena to a Study of the Return of the Repressed in History***

(Booknote, Volume 5, Number 1, March 1997)

Anonymous (with drawings by Clifford Harper)

London: Rebel Press, 1994.

ISBN 0-946061-13-0 (PB) £4.50. iii + 38pp.

This volume is a reissue of a text originally published c. 1970, edited by Clifford Harper and illustrated by his drawings. In the Introduction, Harper states that he knows little of the origins of this anonymous anthology of enthused anarchist writing, other than that it was published by the Solidarity Bookshop in Chicago and printed at the Printing Co-op in Detroit. Lorraine Perlman, in *Having Little, Being Much*, reveals that the Printing Co-op was set up by summer 1970, and that sometime shortly thereafter, 'Peter Allen, an anarchist printer from Chicago, came to print his *Prolegomena*' (p. 67). Since then, the book has gone out of print and has fallen into undeserved obscurity. This edition is an attempt to remedy that situation. Whether it will be successful remains open to debate.

The cover blurb announces: 'Re-issued here for the first time... *Prolegomena* will now reach the audience it deserves.' But the way in which the book has been reissued renders this statement problematic. On the one hand, Harper notes in his introduction that the volume has not just been reissued (minus its poor illustrations). In fact, four texts have been excised, three on the grounds that they are 'rather long and not very interesting' (p. ii), the other because it is in Middle English. On the other hand, the lavish production values and the beautiful presentation, mean that the price of this rather slim book is quite high. So the text seems to fall between two stools: it is not of historical or scholarly value in that it remains incomplete, but its price might discourage wide circulation among contemporary activists.

This is a pity, because this text does deserve a high profile, both as historical example and as inspiration to current insurgents. The extracts and short items anthologised are largely Anglo-American in focus, and are drawn mostly from the period stretching from the American and French Revolutions through to the Russian Revolution. Chiefly anarchist in

orientation, and certainly informed by radical social awareness, this text sits proudly alongside other anthologies of ultra writing, such as Black and Parfrey's *Rants and Incendiary Tracts: Voices of Desperate Illumination 1558-Present* and Green's *Black Letters: 300 Years of 'Enthused' German Writing*. Although necessarily uneven, the volume is worth having alone for the gorgeously extremist language and politics of French and Russian anarchists between 1880-1920. Redolent with energy, anger, scorn and hope, these texts are aptly illustrated by the stark, angular monochrome of Harper's drawings.

Despite reservations, this is a volume worth acquiring. Let's hope it lives up to its title.

JOHN MOORE  
UNIVERSITY OF LUTON

**Anarchism and Poststructuralism** (Review Article, Volume 5, Number 2, October 1997)

*The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*

Todd May

University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.  
ISBN 0-271-01045-2 (HB) 28.50; 0-271-01046-0 (PB) 13.95. x + 165pp.

Any discussion of the interface between anarchism and poststructuralism is likely to be written from one side of the fence or the other, and this will inevitably affect the nature of the analysis undertaken. This text is written from the poststructuralist side, and as a result one must carefully scrutinise the author's grounding in anarchism. The book's bibliography provides a useful indicator in this respect. The anarchist titles listed comprise two books by Bakunin, three by Kropotkin, one by Proudhon, one by Bookchin, one by Ward, *Reinventing Anarchy*, *The Anarchist Reader*, and the standard overviews by Woodcock and Joll. The most notable aspect of this list is its omissions.

Elsewhere I have argued that anarchist history, on the model of feminist history, can be assigned a two phase periodisation. Just like first-wave feminism, anarchism has an early phase, conveniently labelled as classical anarchism. From its intellectual origins in Godwin and Proudhon, classical anarchism developed into its mature form during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, finding its climactic expression (but also its swansong) in the Spanish Revolution. This is the phase of anarchism which Woodcock pronounced dead in the mid-1950s in the first edition of *Anarchism*.

But unbeknownst to those immersed in classical anarchist traditions, a new, second-wave of anarchism (akin and indeed roughly contemporaneous with second-wave feminism) was stirring. The Situationists represent a convenient marker of the transition point, and serve as origin for the remarkable efflorescence of second-wave anarchism that is currently underway. Second-wave anarchism is still

frequently not even recognised by anarchists and commentators who still cling to the idea that classical anarchism is the one and only true form of anarchism, even though first-wave anarchism was seen as moribund by Woodcock forty years ago.

As a result, many outside the anarchist milieu are given the misleading impression that a) classical anarchism *is* anarchism, b) anarchism is therefore an historical phenomenon, and thus c) there are no current manifestations of anarchist praxis. The unfortunate consequences of these misconceptions can be seen in May's understanding of anarchism. With the partial exception of *Reinventing Anarchy*, the anarchist titles in May's bibliography consist entirely of texts on or by classical anarchists. (Ward, like Goodman, can perhaps be seen as a transitional figure, but his grounding in the British anarcho-reformist tradition of Godwin and Read underscores his classical anarchist orientation. Bookchin, particularly in light of *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle-Anarchism*, can be unproblematically characterised as a late manifestation of the classical anarchist tradition.)

The question that must be addressed to May's text is: Where are the second-wave anarchists? Where are Debord, Vaneigem, Perlman, Zerzan, and so on? This is not mere pedantry. May is able to cast poststructuralist thinkers as latter-day anarchists precisely because his knowledge of anarchism suggests that currently there is an intellectual vacuum where classical anarchism used to be. The fact that this vacuum is an illusion — an illusion partly fostered by commentators who are either ignorant of, or refuse to acknowledge the existence of, second-wave anarchism — casts an unfortunate doubt on the validity of May's project.

May's book 'attempts to capture what is — or what ought to be — most lasting in the legacy of post-structuralist thought: its anarchism' (155). In order to achieve this aim, May distinguishes between three types of political philosophy: formal, strategic, and tactical. Formal political philosophy is 'characterized by its cleaving either to the pole of what ought to be or to the pole of what is at the expense of the tension between the two' (4). It provides abstract discussions of the large-scale principles that define the ideal society, and thus generates a totalising, unitary

explanation of social relations.

Strategic political philosophy, on the other hand, is concerned with the historical implementation of political philosophies and thus with the pragmatic methodological concerns of achieving political goals. As a result, it 'involves a unitary analysis that aims toward a single goal' (11). In the strategic perspective, power is seen to emanate from a particular centre (e.g., the State, capitalist economic relations) which then provides the focus for practical activities.

In contrast to these totalising forms of political expression, however, tactical political philosophy refuses to align itself with the poles of either what is or what ought to be, preferring to oscillate between the two. Refusing any grand narrative or totalising explanation, the tactical perspective does not see power as residing in a specific locus, but as arising at a number of sites and in the interplay between these sites. In practical terms, this means that political intervention must be local and plural, rather than general and unified. It also has important implications for social agency in that it questions the legitimacy of representation. If the sites of power are multiple, then no one vanguard group is in a privileged position to speak or act on behalf of others.

For May, poststructuralist political philosophy differs from other types of politics because it affirms the tactical rather than the formal or the strategic. However, in anarchism — despite its ambivalent commitment between tactical and strategic thinking — he perceives 'a forerunner to current poststructuralist thought' (13). In an interesting discussion, May exposes the failures of Marxism in terms of its adherence to rigid forms of formal and strategic thinking. He then proceeds to a consideration of anarchism (for which read: classical anarchism) and thence to a discussion of the compatibility of anarchist and poststructuralist thinking, with the aim of outlining (in the words of a chapter title) the 'steps toward a poststructuralist anarchism'.

The problem with this project is that it remains framed entirely within terms of classical anarchism. May sees (classical) anarchism as unsatisfactorily ambivalent in its strategic and tactical tendencies. The reason for these contradictory commitments is easily deduced. Classical

anarchism is strategic insofar as it locates the source of power in a single institution — the State, but tactical where it resists the different types of power that emerge where the State exists. For May, however, the fact that (classical) anarchism — in contrast to Marxism — has pronounced tactical tendencies remains sufficient to cast it as a 'forerunner' of poststructuralist politics, and to characterize the latter as the contemporary form of (intellectual) anarchism.

This is clearly unsatisfactory as well as inaccurate. Anarchism is not the forerunner of anything — least of all a pallid academic tendency such as poststructuralism — because it is not a dead Victorian doctrine, but a living, thriving project. The fact that it has undergone various transformations during its second-wave which have rendered it invisible or unrecognisable to some, should not disguise the fact that classical anarchism can no longer be taken as the basis for discussion of contemporary anarchism. Second-wave anarchism has expanded the project of the classical anarchists: the focus of contemporary anarchism is not the abolition of the State, but the abolition of the totality, of life structured by governance and coercion, of power itself in all its multiple forms. And it is here that contemporary anarchism departs markedly from May's poststructuralist anarchism. Not least in the fact that second-wave anarchism incorporates an explicit rejection of the political as an appropriate focus for practice.

In dealing with issues of power, May draws extensively upon Deleuze, Lyotard and (particularly) Foucault. While approving of the classical anarchist recognition that power is arranged through intersecting networks rather than exclusively through hierarchies, he asserts: 'The anarchist picture of networks requires deepening' (51). And the poststructuralist analysis of power is to provide this development. Poststructuralism, for May, rejects 'the *a priori* of traditional (i.e., classical] anarchism' (85): the notion of power as solely a negative, repressive force, and the notion of subjectivity as a viable source of political action. On the basis of a critique of these ideas from a poststructuralist perspective, May postulates 'a new type of anarchism' (85) which rejects strategic thought for a comprehensive tactical approach: poststructuralist anarchism. The fact

that 'a new type of anarchism' — i.e., second-wave anarchism — already exists, and has on occasion (e.g., in Zerzan's 'The Catastrophe of Postmodernism') been very critical of the poststructuralist project, escapes May altogether.

Following Foucault et al., May affirms the idea that power is not always suppressive, but sometimes productive. But like his poststructuralist mentors, he fudges the issue, from an anarchist perspective, by reiterating this familiar formula. Whether power is suppressive or productive, it is still power: that is to say, it still uses force (whether overtly or insidiously) to construct and define individuals and make them think or act in particular ways. Whether power say 'thou shall not ...' or 'here are your options ...', coercion is involved.

'One would not call all exercises of power oppressive,' May states (96). But surely that depends upon whom one is. May admits that 'anarchists are suspicious of all power' (61), although (as far as the second-wave is concerned) suspicion is a far too cautious term for a project aimed at the abolition of the ensemble of power relations, the control complex itself. But this is not the case with Foucault, who is quoted approvingly as saying:

relations of power are not something bad in themselves, from which one must free oneself .... The problem is not of trying to dissolve them in the Utopia of a perfectly transparent communication, but to give one's self the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics, the *ethos*, the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination. (123)

The references to law, management and minimalist domination, plus the explicit anti-utopian stance, suggest the incompatibility of Foucauldian ideology with contemporary anarchism, and undermine May's claims for a poststructuralist anarchism. 'The question,' May avers, 'is not whether or not there is power, but which relationships of power are acceptable and which are unacceptable' (123). But this is merely the question of liberalism, and indicates the recuperative nature of poststructuralism in

co-opting radical impulses.

For contemporary anarchism, *no* relationships of power are acceptable. ‘If power is suppressive, then the central political question to be asked is: When is the exercise of power legitimate, and when is it not?’ (61). But for second-wave anarchism, the answer is the same, whether power is suppressive *or* productive: never! ‘Given that the old answers to political problems — appropriating the means of production, seizing or eliminating the state, destroying all relations of power — are found to be lacking, what perspective can poststructuralist theory offer for thinking about political change as well as power and political oppression?’ (112). Aside from the fact that for anarchists these are social *not* political problems, the putative failure of ‘the old answers’ is not proved and thus cannot be taken as a given. What can be established, however, is that the perspectives offered by poststructuralism are reformist.

May offers an unconvincing defence to the charge of reformism: ‘The mistake that is made in contrasting revolution and reform lies in the assumption that the former involves a qualitative change in society, while the latter involves only a quantitative change. However, on the alternative picture of politics being sketched here, there are in reality only quantitative changes, qualitative ones being defined in terms of them.’ (54). But this too fudges the point. Revolution (better: insurrection) depends on a rupture, whereas the poststructuralist perspective offered here depends on piecemeal change, the mark of the reformist, and never results in that definitive break. Further, from a second-wave perspective, the totality — the totality of power relations — cannot be resisted in piecemeal fashion, and thus poststructuralist anarchism could never hope to engage in dismantling the totality. As May remarks, ‘The task of a poststructuralist politics is to attempt to construct power relations that can be lived with, not to overthrow power altogether’ (114).

In fact, by undermining subjectivity as the basis from which to launch resistance, May leaves no space from which the totality might be questioned.

The point of [classical] anarchism's resort to the idea of a benign

human essence is to be able to justify its resistance to power. Suppose that anarchists had a different view of power, one that saw power not solely as suppressive but also as productive: power not only suppresses actions, events, and people, but creates them as well. In that case, it would be impossible to justify the resistance to all power; one would have to distinguish clearly acceptable creations or effects (as opposed, in the case of the suppressive assumption, to exercises) of power from unacceptable ones. (63)

The coercive nature of both suppressive and productive power has been demonstrated above, and there is little sense in staging a defence of classical anarchism. However, the intent of this passage is clear, by discrediting the notion of essentialism, May attempts to undermine the anarchist project of resisting all power. This ploy remains ineffective when applied to second-wave anarchism, however.

While classical anarchism may rest its claims on Being, second-wave anarchism emphasises Becoming. Following from Nietzsche's notion of self-overcoming, the Situationists stress *radical subjectivity* as the basis for resistance. The project of resisting the totality rests, not on some essentialist human subject, but on the subject-in-process, or better, the subject-in-rebellion: the radical subject. The processual nature of this identity undercuts May's charge of essentialism, but at the same time provides a basis in lived experience for resistance to the totality, rather than reformist quibbling over acceptable and unacceptable forms of power.

May has written a stimulating and readable book, and one worth reading alone for its candour about the politics of poststructuralism. This text allows one to think through important issues, even though one's conclusions differ widely from those held by the author. On one level, however, the text stands as an indictment of the distance between academia and contemporary anarchism, and between anarchist commentators and the present anarchist milieu.

JOHN MOORE  
UNIVERSITY OF LUTON

無  
心  
有

## **Composition and Decomposition: Contemporary Anarchist Aesthetics** (Volume 6, Number 2, October 1998)

**ABSTRACT:** In the postwar period anarchist aesthetics have undergone a profound transformation. This essay provides an overview of the major recent debates about the nature and possibilities of anarchist art. Herbert Read challenged the status of art-as-commodity in the immediate aftermath of the second world war. But the acceleration of post-artistic anarchist thought really takes off in the 1960s with the Situationists' notorious demand for the suppression and realisation of art. Subsequent debate consists of working through the implications of the Situationist position and in some instances proceeding beyond it. Two broad strategies for developing post-Situationist aesthetic praxes are examined: the abandonment of the textual space for the 'lived poetry' of revolutionary activity, and hence a dissolution of the boundaries between art and lived experience; and the development of forms of art which enact revolution and thus push textuality to its limits.

A glossary of writers and movements is provided in the appendix. With characteristic caution, Herbert Read comments in *Anarchy and Order* on the cultural condition of Europe in the immediate postwar period:

In a certain sense one can welcome the breaking of the pattern of European history. The State and all its works, banks and their strangulating currency, the international money market, the tariff system and the artificial distribution of industry which shelters behind it, nationalised systems of secular education, of military service, of taxation and amortisation – it may all perish. The Black Market has many ugly features, but at least it does represent a certain human vitality – a determination to escape from the artificial bonds of the State. From a cultural point of view, I am somewhat envious of this vitality. What we need is a Black Market in culture, a determination to avoid the bankrupt

academic institutions, the fixed values and standardised products of current art and literature; not to trade our spiritual goods through the recognised channels of Church, or State, or Press; rather, to pass them ‘under the counter.’ (Read, 1971, p. 184)

Shattering the linearity of history – Fredy Perlman’s his-story, the narrative of enslavement and coercion – opens for Read the possibility, regarded with both hope and anticipation, that the entire system of industrial civilisation might collapse – ‘it may all perish’. Such a revolutionary questioning of the totality does not, however, result in an insurrectionary perspective for Read. At least in this passage, he does not locate an agent for radical social change in the postwar period. Instead, he perceives in the Black Market – the supposedly criminal, dark side of a social system, capitalism, that is innately criminal and sociopathic – an admirable anti-statist vitality. Rather than rehearse Bakuninist theses about the revolutionary potential of the lumpenproletariat, however, Read directs attention away from the economic toward the cultural sphere, switching linguistic register from the descriptive to the hortatory. He calls for ‘a Black Market in culture’, a form of cultural production and exchange that avoids the dominant channels of communication and perhaps mediation itself.

Aiming to elude the bankruptcy, staticity and standardisation of capitalist culture, Read proposes an underground culture over a decade before its appearance in the mid-1960s. Implicitly, such an underground culture is coded as dissident here. But in calling for an oppositional culture that challenges the hegemonies of ‘current art and literature’, Read also calls into question the entire project of modernism – the project for which, in his public persona, he had acted as impresario. Further, however, beyond this call for a covert culture of dissent, and maybe resistance, one can perhaps discern the subtextual suggestion, not merely of passing cultural products under the counter, but of doing away with the counter altogether, and in doing away with the notion of art-as-commodity, effecting a radical transformation of the art work.

This is certainly the tenor of subsequent statements by anarchist

aestheticians. The Situationists notoriously called for the realisation and suppression of art – a concept frequently misunderstood. Raoul Vaneigem explains in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* in 1967:

‘What is poetry?’, ask the aesthetes. And we may as well give them the obvious answer right away: poetry rarely involves poems these days. Most art works betray poetry. How could it be otherwise, when poetry and power are irreconcilable .... Poetry is always somewhere. Its recent abandonment of the arts makes it easier to see that it resides primarily in individual acts, in a lifestyle and in the search for such a style. Everywhere repressed, this poetry springs up everywhere. Brutally put down, it is reborn in violence. It plays muse to rioters, informs revolt and animates all great revolutionary carnivals for a while, until the bureaucrats consign it to the prison or hagiography. (Vaneigem, 1983, pp. 154, 156)

For Vaneigem, authentic contemporary poetry – or, rather, the abstract quality of the poetic – has departed from the text of the poem and finds its only true expression in social rebellion. According to the Situationists, this development remains part of an ongoing trajectory. In a communiqué of 1963, the Situationist International indicated: ‘In the past every dominant class had its *own* art – for the same reasons that a classless society will have none, will be beyond artistic practice. But the historical conditions of our time... are such that major art in this period has necessarily been revolutionary. What has been called modern art, from its origins in the nineteenth century to its full development in the first third of the twentieth, has been an art *against* the bourgeoisie’ (Situationist International, 1981, p. 143). Art is characterised as a product of class society, and with the disappearance of the latter, the former too will be superseded. Modernist art, however, has acted as part of the revolutionary struggle to go beyond class society, but has experienced inevitable co-optation and a consequent loss of contestatory thrust. The Situationists insist:

Former moments of contestation survive *fragmentarily* and lose their artistic (or postartistic) value to the extent they have lost the heart of contestation. With their loss of this heart they have also lost any reference to the mass of postartistic acts (of revolt and free reconstruction of life) that already exist in the world and that are tending to replace art. This fragmentary contestation can then only withdraw to an aesthetic position and harden rapidly into a dated and ineffectual aesthetic *in a world where it is already too late for aesthetics*. (Situationist International, 1981, p. 144)

Works of art are only valid if they promote or engage in contestation, either in the contestation of meanings or as part of wider radical social contestatory projects. Their significance resides, not in the text, nor in extra-textual incitements (as in *engagé* art), but in post-textual tendencies – i.e., those very tendencies that tend to replace art. If successful, therefore, such art results in its own abolition, its own self-destruction. The Situationists assert:

The time for art is over. It is now a matter of *realising* art, of really building on every level of life everything that hitherto could only be an artistic memory or an illusion, dreamed and preserved unilaterally. Art can be realised *only by being suppressed*. However, as opposed to the present society, which suppresses it by replacing it with the automatism of an even more passive and hierarchical spectacle, we maintain that art can really be suppressed *only by being realised*. (Situationist International, 1981, p.145)

Art, in short, can only be realised by its transformation into the post-artistic, post- textual arena of ‘revolt and [the] free reconstruction of life.’

The Situationist critique of art was broadened and deepened in the 1980s in the work of John Zerzan. For the latter, symbolic mediation itself, arising out of division of labour, constitutes the basis of alienation

and control structures, and in a number of provocative essays he calls for the abolition of a number of forms of mediation, including time, language, number and art. Interestingly, the 1986 essay on art caused the most controversy in anarchist journals. Condemning all art from the cave painting of the Upper Paleolithic onward, Zerzan's 'The Case against Art' characterises artistic expression as evidence of the rise of coercion and alienation:

Art, like language, is a system of symbolic exchange that introduces exchange itself. It is also a necessary device for holding together a community based on the first symptoms of unequal life .... Art not only creates the symbols of and for a society, it is a basic part of the symbolic matrix of estranged social life .... Why then would one respond positively to art? As compensation and palliative, because our relationship to nature and life is so deficient and disallows an authentic one. (Zerzan, 1988, pp.55, 57, 58)

While the Situationists called for the realisation of art in and through radical social transformation, Zerzan recommends a refusal of art as part of the project of destroying all forms of mediation and replacing them with immediacy and a total transparency in human interrelations. Like the Situationists, however, he sees the revolutionary social situation as the prefigurement and embodiment of such conditions:

Though Bergson tried to approach the goal of thought without symbols, such a breakthrough seems impossible outside our active undoing of all the layers of alienation. In the extremity of revolutionary situations, immediate communication has bloomed, if briefly .... In the transfiguration we must enact the symbolic will be left behind and art refused in favor of the real. Play, creativity, self-expression and authentic experience will recommence at that moment. (Zerzan, 1988, pp.57, 62)

Zerzan admits in a response to an essay critical of 'The Case Against Art' that: I am in full agreement with [the idea] that art... has been employed to good effect for iconoclastic, critical purposes. There have certainly been rebellious artists, and playful ones – not exclusive categories, to be sure' (Zerzan, 1993, p.53). Zerzan does not entirely rule out, then, art as a weapon in the struggle for an anarchist future. However, in his 1984 essay 'Language: Origin and Meaning,' he remains very critical of literary uses of language. He notes that since Modernist writers 'attempted a new syntax as well as a new vocabulary, the restraints and distortions of language have been assaulted wholesale in literature. Russian futurists, Dada (e.g., Hugo Ball's effort in the 1920s to create "poetry without words"), Artaud, the Surrealists and lettristes were among the more exotic elements of a general resistance to language' (Zerzan, 1988, p.34). Resistance to language, however, remains inadequate, not least because the medium chosen to express this resistance is language itself.

Language, which at any moment embodies the ideology of a particular culture, must be ended in order to abolish both categories of estrangement; a project of some considerable social dimensions, let us say. That literary texts (e.g., *Finnegan's Wake*, the poetry of e.e. cummings) break the rules of language seems mainly to have the paradoxical effect of evoking the rules themselves. By permitting the free play of ideas about language, society treats these ideas as mere play. (Zerzan, 1988, p.34)

Zerzan's call for the abolition of art, language and culture resulted in sharp responses from a number of anarchist commentators. Under the general heading '3 Cases for Art,' the anarchist paper *Fifth Estate* published its responses in 1987. Although emphatically pro-art in the face of Zerzan's anti-art stance, George Bradford's contributions to the debate virtually come to the same conclusion as Zerzan, although from a diametrically opposed perspective. Noting the correspondence between Zerzan's position and André Breton's statement, 'The poet of the future will surmount the depressing notion of the inseparable divorce of action

and dream', Bradford states:

Neither the revolutionary upheavals nor the visionary poets and artists achieved this renewal; their failure left the forces of domination in an even more powerful, entrenched position. Their discoveries, like weapons left behind on a battlefield during a retreat, are now used against us. To challenge the alienated category of art; to create a culture-in-action embedded in nature; to renew language, poetry, a Ghost Dance to unleash the forces held at bay since the origins of hierarchic civilisation – all of this remains for us to do. The authentic life which recommences will have moved beyond art – but it nevertheless will be danced as the pulsing of our blood communicates with the planets; it will sing like Shelley's [actually, Coleridge's] Aeolian harp as the breath-of-life passes over it; it will be daubed in paint on our bodies; it will be plucked on strings and pounded on drums and blown on every imaginable kind of hom. (Bradford, 1987a, p.9)

In contrast to Zerzan, Bradford robustly affirms the practice of culture, or rather a culture-in-action which moves beyond art and yet embodies it in daily life and the body itself. Rather than the abolition of culture, Bradford demands its rejuvenation in autochthonous form; rather than the abolition of language, he recommends its renewal as a tool 'to unleash forces held at bay since the origins of hierarchic civilisation', forces which will allow a recommencement of 'the authentic life':

A culture-in-action, a visionary language wedded to nature, can also appear, as the surrealists proposed, as a declaration of insurrection against history. Poetry, like love, like an ecstatic dance, can bring down an empire, exploding its rigid conditioning, its logic, its repressive reality. Wilderness continues to live within us. It remains for us to free it, through our bodies, which are the world, which are a culture, a dance, a poetry: desire manifest. (Bradford, 1987a, p.9)

Language, then, and particularly literary – or more accurately, poetic – language is given a central role in bringing about radical social change. But in the process, art is to undergo a profound transformation – not effacement (as in Zerzan’s scenario), but integration and metamorphosis, which similarly results in its disappearance. A Situationist-style realisation and suppression of art is to occur, but in terms unrecognisable to Situationists. As Bradford comments: ‘So it becomes imperative to “free” art – that impulse – so that it can disappear into the contours of a beautiful daily life, a tribal life.’ Referring to ‘the liberated image,’ he notes: ‘If we are faithful to its call, art will become something altogether different’ (Bradford, 1987b, p.10). Abolition or transformation: clearly the outcome would be different, but in either case art as it is currently constituted would disappear one way or another.

Kingsley Widmer, in his 1993 essay ‘Anarchist Aesthetics: A Few Notes Towards a Libertarian View of the Arts,’ also responds to Zerzan’s ‘The Case against Art.’ He claims that ‘There can’t, of course, be an “anarchist aesthetic” in the sense of a doctrine of authoritative rules, a hierarchy of manners and forms and genres, or any orthodoxy of elitist proprieties and subjects or demanded styles and responses,’ as such an aesthetic is anathema to ‘an intellectual perspective essentially rooted in resistance and refusal.’ However, he suggests that ‘there are also some attitudes towards the arts possibly compatible with fuller freedoms and autonomies, egalitarian community, and liberating practices’ (Widmer, 1993, p.50). In arguing for these ‘attitudes’ contra Zerzan, however, Widmer provides his own version of the transcendence of art in anarchist aesthetics:

...the historical defense of art as creative play has not incidentally been yoked with demands for freedom and rebellions against authority ... Authoritarian philosophers ... have condemned the irreverent playfulness as well as ecstatic incitements of art. *Homo Ludens* seems difficult to contain and control. The playful tends to pursue its own delights, shapes, rhythms, forms. Hence the

sense of freedom, as against necessity, such as work, more predetermined and controlled. The libertarian minded thus want to turn work into play ... The domination minded want to turn play into work-ordered competitiveness, specialised hierarchies, profitable and otherwise exploitable. (Widmer, 1993, p.52)

Although Widmer retains more respect for the text than other anarchist aestheticians (or post-aestheticians), there is nonetheless the sense here that art is to be subsumed into the practice of 'creative play.' Creative play and rebellion against authority are conflated, and the subtextual suggestion in the phrase 'ecstatic incitements of art' is that the anarchic, playful text blurs the boundaries between the text and the world, and that a protean *Homo Ludens* cannot be contained within the textual prison. Thus, although more cautious, the upshot again remains that anarchist art is unlikely to remain text-bound, but overflows with meanings which efface categories of creative expression. If the text does not completely disappear, its parameters will no longer remain clear, and indeed will be continually breached, perhaps ignored. Art is realised, not through suppression, abolition, or dissolution, but through its subsumption in the broader practice of culture as creative play.

In postwar anarchist aesthetics, then, poetry, literature, or art in general can only experience containment – and hence recuperation and co-optation – within the confines of the text. Anarchist art either abandons the textual space altogether and becomes what Vaneigem calls 'lived poetry' (Vaneigem, 1983, p. 156), finding expression in revolutionary acts, or it constantly pushes at the boundaries of textuality, perpetually attempting to transcend (or transgress) its limits by effectuating radical social change in the material world, or by making the world over in its own image.

The former impulse finds contemporary expression in Hakim Bey's 1985 articulation of poetic terrorism, a term appropriated from French Symbolism and Surrealism. Like the *Attentat* of the anarchist bombers, poetic terrorism is intended to make people sit up and take notice: 'The audience reaction or aesthetic-shock produced by PT ought to be at least

as strong as the emotion of terror – powerful disgust, sexual arousal, superstitious awe, sudden intuitive breakthrough, dada-esque angst... if it does not change someone's life (aside from the artist) it fails' (Bey, 1991, p.5). A synthesis of propaganda by the deed and propaganda by the word, it clearly possesses the vitality of Read's cultural Black Market, but with the commodification element excised: 'PT is an act in a Theater of Cruelty which has no stage, no rows of seats, no tickets & no walls. In order to work at all, PT must categorically be divorced from all conventional structures for art consumption (galleries, publications, media)' (Bey, 1991, p.5). Bey even reiterates Read's concern with the convergence of underworld culture and underground culture, defining poetic terrorism as 'Art as crime; crime as art' (Bey, 1991, p.6).

The other impulse in contemporary anarchist aesthetics, however, which rather than abandoning the text, seeks to use it as a springboard, is equally vital. Bey remarks: 'The text... which will change reality: – Rimbaud dreamed of that & then gave up in disgust. But he entertained too subtle an idea about magic. The crude truth is perhaps that texts can only change reality when they inspire readers to *see* & *act*, rather than merely see' (Bey, 1994, p.57). Defamiliarising textual strategies might change perception, but unless that perceptual transformation results in action, it remains isolated, impotent, socially negligible. The poetry (in Vaneigem's sense of the term) remains trapped within its textuality, its prison house of language. As Bey comments: 'Well it's not totally valueless – but afterwards what will be *different*? (Bey, 1994, p.57). The answer is: not much, or nothing significant, certainly nothing radical.

Such a conception of textuality has important aesthetic implications. If anarchist art is to leap beyond the boundaries of its textuality and 'change reality,' then it cannot attempt to mimic that reality through verisimilitude. If representation is anathema to anarchists in socio-political terms, it is equally antithetical in artistic terms, and for broadly similar reasons. Artistic representation encodes power relations within the subject, between subjects, and between subject and object. The anarchist project of abolishing control structures remains incompatible with such forms of artistic representation. Hence the need to develop anarchist aesthetics that

are characterised by a radical refusal of power.

If realism remains inappropriate to anarchist art, Bey locates its most apt aesthetic expression in ‘the irruption of the marvelous into everyday life’ (Bey, 1994, p.59), including the irruption of the marvellous out of the text and into daily life. But this irruption means that the contemporary anarchist text continually seeks to go beyond itself, continually edges toward materialising itself in the everyday, and hence moves beyond language and beyond conceptual coherence toward an anarchy of meanings. Bey notes this constant tendency:

Writing has taken us to the very edge beyond which writing may be impossible. Any texts which could survive the plunge over this edge – into whatever abyss or Abyssinia lies beyond – would have to be virtually self-created, like the miraculous hidden-treasure Dakini-scrolls of Tibet or the tadpole-script spirit-texts of Taoism – & absolutely incandescent, like the last screamed message of a witch or heretic burning at the stake (to paraphrase Artaud).

I can sense these texts trembling just beyond the veil. (Bey, 1994, p.58)

The explicit parallel offered by Bey links the anarchist text and the anarchist transformation of social relations. The anarchist utopia lies over the edge, in the abyss, beyond the veil of the future. This utopia, in its unimaginable richness, is coded as mysterious, miraculous, exotic, numinous, and autonomous. Those anarchist texts which tremble ‘just beyond the veil’ act as messengers from that future because they themselves act as utopian instances. Prefiguring an anarchist future through appropriate deployments of content, form and style, such texts aim to make the attainment of anarchist utopia more likely through encouraging readers to ‘*see & act*’ in ways that will bring about such a future.

Bey senses such texts ‘trembling just beyond the veil’. I would argue that instances of these texts are already with us. In literary terms, for

example (and many theorists considered in this essay prioritise literature as an aesthetic form), one could perhaps point to Herbert Read's *The Green Child*, the postwar works of Edward Dahlberg, Fredy Perlman's prose poem *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!*, and my own short fiction, e.g., *Book of Levelling*.

In order to identify, understand and indeed perhaps to write such texts, it is helpful to have an understanding of contemporary literary theory. Current theoretical emphasis on the ways in which literary texts problematise representation, decentre the subject, question totalisation, and engage in acts of resistance are clearly pertinent to understanding or producing discourse commensurate with the anarchist aim of exposing, resisting and abolishing control structures.

But the application of such theoretical tools must always be aware of the particular *inflection* of contemporary anarchist art. There is a sense of the apocalyptic about this art. Bey indicates that anarchist writing is 'like the last screamed message of a witch or heretic burning at the stake,' and this image of the *auto-da-fe* is telling. For Bey, anarchist writing has an intensity, an incandescence that is bound up with its sense of defiance (hence the image of the witch or heretic) but also its finality. Contemporary anarchist texts are in a sense suicide notes, but notes left by suicides who expect to survive the leap into the unknown, anticipating the miraculous existence of utopia on the other side of the abyss. The meanings which seek to leap beyond the bounds of the text are expected to manifest themselves as the marvellous in everyday life. But in the act of leaping, transformations – experiential, social, and semantic-are expected to occur.

The contemporary anarchist text aims to scramble the codes, to deconstruct and disassemble meanings and then reassemble them in unanticipatable fractal patterns, the patterns of chaos itself. In short, it aims to enact revolution through its textual procedures, as well as prompting the enactment of revolution in daily life. The Situationists declared, 'Demand the Impossible!', and contemporary anarchist texts aim to fulfil that demand. As Max Blechman says in his 1994 essay 'Toward an Anarchist Aesthetic':

It is said that an anarchist society is impossible. Artistic activity is the process of realising the impossible. It extends the realm of the possible to that which has been considered impossible ... The realms of art can be considered forms of knowledge as yet alien to most human experience but always latent components of human consciousness that are ready to transform themselves into actuality. Artistic activity can be, when freely undertaken, the act of creating a form for that which does not yet exist. (Blechman, 1994, p.16)

But in doing so, in making the imaginative leap, anarchist artists risk falling into incomprehensibility. 'Writing' as Bey indicates, 'has taken us to the very edge beyond which writing may be impossible'. Or, as he proceeds to suggest, it has taken us to the verge of meaning as it is defined within control systems, to the limits of the possible. Now it can only transcend those limits by making 'impossible' meanings, and in the process undergo a strange metamorphosis, 'a sea-change into something rich and strange'.

## REFERENCES

Bey, Hakim. 1991. 'Chaos' in *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

Bey, Hakim. 1994. 'Critique of the Listener' in *Immediatism*. San Francisco: AK Press.

Blechman, Max 1994. 'Toward an Anarchist Aesthetic' in *Drunken Boat 2*: 10-19. Brooklyn & Seattle: Autonomedia/Left Bank.

Bradford, George 1987a. 'A "Culture-in-Action"' in *Fifth Estate* 21(2): 6-9.

Bradford, George 1987b. 'Journal Notes on Art' in *Fifth Estate* 21(2): 6-10.

Read, Herbert 1971 (1954). *Anarchy and Order: Essays in Politics*. Boston: Beacon Press.

*Situationist International* 1981 (1963). 'Response to a Questionnaire from the Center for Socio-Experimental Art' in *Situationist International Anthology*. (Ken Knabb ed. and trans.). Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets,

Vaneigem, Raoul 1983 (1967). *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. (Donald Nicholson-Smith trans.). London: Left Bank/Rebel Press.

Widmer, Kingsley 1993. 'Anarchist Aesthetics: A Few Notes Toward a Libertarian View of the Arts' in *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* 35: 50-53.

Zerzan, John 1988. *Elements of Refusal*. Seattle: Left Bank.

Zerzan, John 1993. 'The Absence of Art: A Response to Kingsley Widmer' in *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* 35: 53.

## GLOSSARY

**Bergson, Henri** – A late nineteenth/early twentieth century French philosopher, who elaborated a process philosophy which rejected static values in favour of values of motion, change and evolution. His most famous work remains *Creative Evolution* (1907).

**Bey, Hakim** – Contemporary American anarchist theorist whose most influential notion, the temporary autonomous zone, is elaborated in his

widely-read *TAZ* (1991).

**Blechman, Max** – Editor of *Drunken Boat*, a 1990s American journal devoted to exploring the historical and contemporary connexions between art and anarchism.

**Dada** – A nihilistic but politicised avant-garde artistic movement which flourished in Europe and the USA during the late 1910s. Its participants conceived Dada as an iconoclastic expression of disgust at bourgeois values and the horrors of World War 1.

**Dahlberg, Edward** – US writer whose critical study of American literature and culture, *Can These Bones Live* (1941, 1960 revised edition) remains a crucial document of cultural anarchism, and whose uncategorisable postwar texts, especially *The Sorrows of Priapus* (1957), are early articulations of anarchist primitivist ideas.

**Lettrism** – A postwar European avant-garde literary and visual artistic movement which attempted to renew and transcend Surrealism. Its main claim to historical significance remains its point of origin for Situationism.

**Perlman, Fredy** – American anarchist theorist and writer whose major work, *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* (1983) is a landmark text in anarchist primitivism.

**Read, Herbert** – British poet, art critic and anarchist, author of *Anarchy and Order* (1954), *Education Through Art* (1943) and many other works.

**Rimbaud, Arthur** – A late nineteenth century French poet identified with Symbolism, who asserted that the poet must become a seer, or *voyant*, who through the use of drugs and other means can attain altered states of consciousness and thus pierce through the constraints and restraints of everyday life. Major works include *A Season in Hell* (1873) and *Illuminations* (1873).

**Situationism** – A radical social philosophy which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, and which attempted to synthesise Marxism and anarchism. A key theme remains the notion of the Spectacle in which life has been replaced with a representation of itself, due to the alienations produced by mass consumerism and the mass mediatisation of daily life.

**Surrealism** – A visual and literary avant-garde artistic movement which flourished from the 1920s to the 1960s. Attempting to synthesise the insights of Freud and Marx, the surrealists produced artworks that drew upon the irrational to deliver a social critique.

**Symbolism** – A late nineteenth century avant-garde literary and visual artistic movement which flourished particularly in France during the Belle Epoque. Some French Symbolist writers – e.g., Fénéon, Tailhade and Quillard – were either anarchists or sympathetic to anarchism during the 1890s, and contributed much to the development of anarchist aesthetics.

**Vaneigem, Raoul** – Along with Guy Debord, one of the two major Situationist theorists. His major work remains *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1968).

**Widmer, Kingsley** – A prolific contemporary American libertarian literary and cultural critic, whose work includes *Counterings: Utopian Dialectic in Contemporary Contexts* (1988).

**Zerzan, John** – A major contemporary American anti-civilisation theorist, whose controversial but seminal essays on art, time, language, number and agriculture as the origins of power appear in *Elements of Refusal* (1988).

***September Commando: Gestures of Futility and Frustration*** (Booknote, Volume 6, Number 1, March 1998)

John Yates

San Francisco, Edinburgh and London: AK Press/Active Distribution, 1996 ISBN-1-873176-52-X (PB) \$11.95/£7.95. 95pp.

At first glance, this text might be mistaken for an anarchist coffee table book. In actuality, it is not even that. While it is certainly coffee table material, it is not anarchist. Although the author of this collection of graphics is credited with 'keep[ing] the revolutionary spirit alive and clocking', the range of issues addressed fall squarely within the concerns of liberal reformism.

The text consists of two sections. The larger section comprises over seventy monotonous full-page graphic designs, all using the same format. A monochrome photograph is framed between two black horizontal bars on which the text is printed – always in the same typeface. There is no attempt at any *détournement* of the image. The text is intercut with the image, which sometimes confirms the text ('Tolerance is [image: white and black children with arms around one another] child's play') or provides a knowing ironic comment ('We can't see the wood [image: pile of abandoned cardboard boxes] for the former trees'). The lesser section consists of cover images for punk rock commodities.

Yates's work isn't subtle and therefore isn't even effective as propaganda. But then again, is the coffee table really a site for revolutionary social struggle?

JOHN MOORE  
UNIVERSITY OF LUTON

***Anarchy after Leftism*** (Booknote, Volume 6, Number 2, October 1998)

Bob Black

Columbia, MO: Columbia Alternative Library Press, 1997 ISBN 1-890532-00-2, \$7.95/£6.00. 150 pp.

Written in part as a response to Murray Bookchin's defamatory *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism* (1995), Black's text is not merely a critique of Bookchin's thought. Certainly the book is a searing indictment of Bookchin and the stranglehold he has attempted to exert over contemporary anarchism. But, more importantly in the long-term, in interring Bookchin's work it also performs the last rites over anarcho-leftism. Just as Cohn-Bendit once announced the obsolescence of communism, so Black proclaims the obsolescence of classical anarchism, the anarchism of the left (that is, of loyal opposition). Black, however, undertakes this act with far more style, panache and humour than Cohn-Bendit. Although he occasionally makes unnecessarily cruel remarks, for the most part his acerbic style is measured and witty.

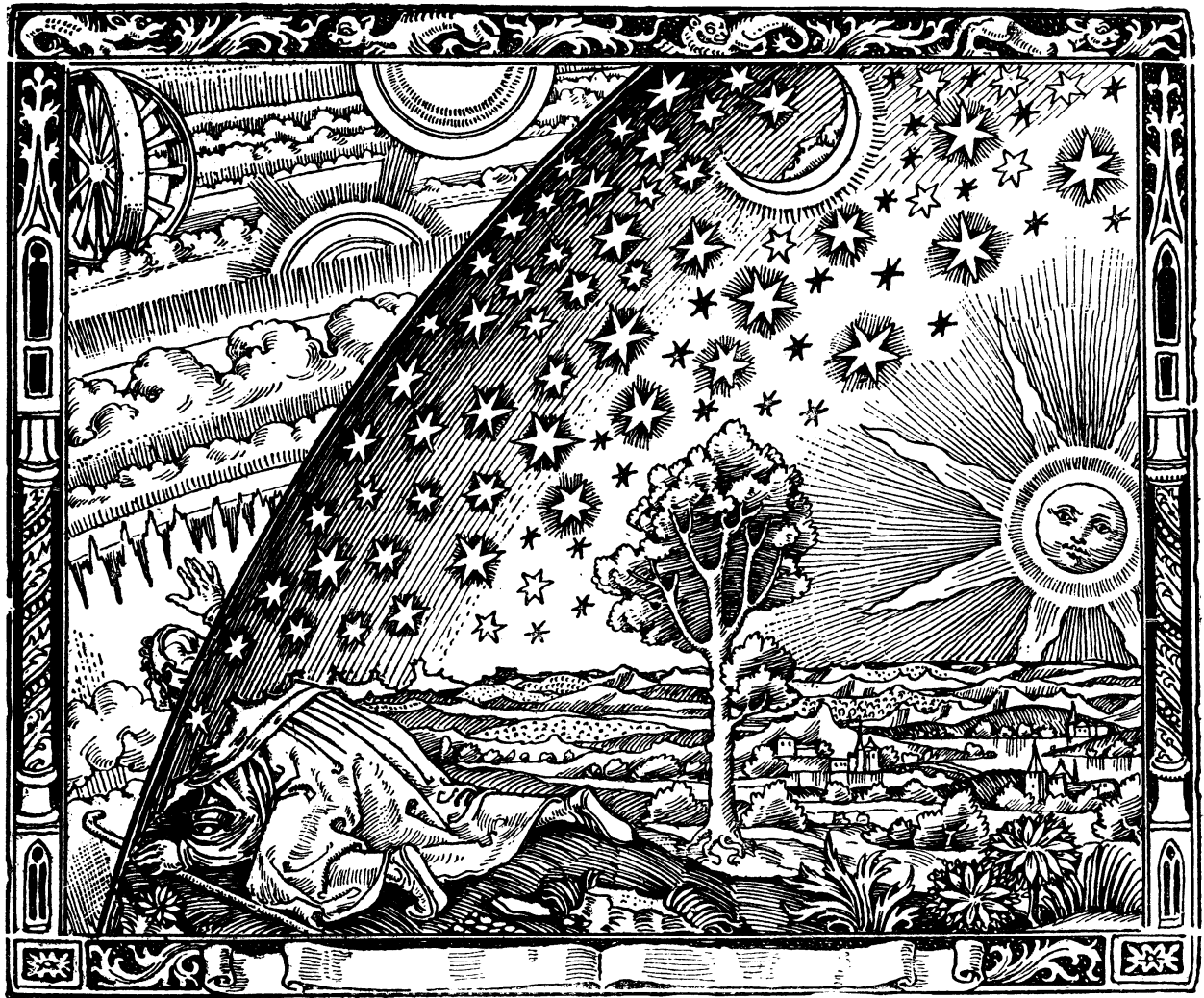
Having said this, it is with the cold incisive tools of logic that Black exposes the contradictions and prejudices in Bookchin's work. The results of Black's investigation will come as a shock to those who have not subjected Bookchin to the degree of close scrutiny undertaken in this text. Through reasoned argument, and by allowing his subject to damn himself through his own words. Black provocatively demonstrates that Bookchin is not an anarchist by any standard (or even non-standard) definition of the term. On the contrary, Black establishes beyond reasonable doubt that Bookchin is a statist and, further, that key elements of his ideology, far from being progressive, let alone revolutionary, are thoroughly compatible with the repressive project.

Black correctly identifies the bankruptcy of Bookchin's ideas with the bankruptcy of the anarcho-leftism with which he is falsely associated. In a thought-provoking final chapter, Black briefly but suggestively explores the implications of the paradigm shift taking place within contemporary anarchism, with the emergence of post-leftist anarchy or various New

Anarchisms.

This text is a rare example of anarchist polemic at its best. *Anarchy after Leftism* is certainly the most important book by Black since *The Abolition of Work*. But it is also historically significant because it firmly establishes the rupture between the anarchism of the past and the anarchisms of the future.

JOHN MOORE  
UNIVERSITY OF LUTON



**Anarchy: Free Fall** (Editorial Introduction, Volume 7, Number 2, October 1999)

Why anarchism and science fiction? At first glance, there may seem little connection between the two. Anarchism is a praxis which aims at radical social transformation; science fiction is a form of popular culture which seems to enact a kind of cultural imperialism on the future. Alert readers might point to the capacity of certain science fictions to provide warnings about the dystopian possibilities of current society continuing along its present trajectory. Even more alert readers might point out science fiction's capacity to generate utopian visions of the future. Such readers might recall texts which posit an explicitly anarchist vision, such as Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and *Always Coming Home* (1985), or those which represent a world which is anarchist in all but name, such as Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren* (1974) or Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). But these are arguments about content and by definition such discussions imply that as a form science fiction is ideologically neutral. In other words, such arguments maintain that there is nothing inherently anarchistic about science fiction, nothing that makes this particular genre any more appropriate as a vehicle for anarchism than any other generic form of popular writing or culture.

The American science fiction writer and critic Samuel Delany, however, mounts an argument which indicates that precisely the opposite case pertains. In the course of determining the reading protocols that differentiate science fiction from any other popular genre, Delany shows that the language and form – in short, the discourse – deployed by science fiction is far from ideologically neutral. On the contrary, he indicates that SF discourse creates a subversive discursive space, a zone within which signifiers become dislocated from conventional meanings and thus acquire the capacity to generate alternative semantic configurations. Delany does not frame his discussion explicitly in anarchist terms, but in terms of poststructuralism. Certain contemporary commentators, notably Todd May in *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, postulate

a convergence between anarchism and poststructuralism. But leaving aside the legitimacy of this intersection, Delany's discussion remains rich in implication for anarchist critical approaches to science fiction.

At the basis of Delany's theory remains the insight that social formations are structured by relations of power and hierarchy. Drawing upon Saussurian semiotics and its Lacanian elaborations, Delany maintains that all forms of hierarchy derive, not from the division of labour, but from the division of the signifier and the signified – or more precisely, the privileging of the signifier over the signified. The binarisms which emerge from this semiotic division structure and imbue all perception and behaviour by generating what Delany terms 'gravide value systems'. And it is these systems which science fiction assaults:

Science fiction ... constitutes the prime demotic attack on gravitic value systems – those value systems (of thought, speech, and written analysis) that organise ... almost all our rhetoric about society (with its lower and upper classes), intelligence (of the higher and lower sort), and social evolution (that has reached a higher or lower level) – in brief, any discourse where the image lower signs the presence 'of lesser value' and the image higher signs the presence 'of greater value', however oblique, however critical the expression. (Delany, 1978: v)

Delany avers that 'much of Western thought' – and hence practice as well – 'is organised by (and restricted to) a primarily gravitic value matrix'. But 'since the Industrial Revolution' and as a result of it, much Western thought 'can be seen as a massive critique on the too frequently inaccurate results such a graviticly restricted value system constantly cedes us' (Delany 1978: 182, 184). Gravitic value systems are inaccurate because they insist that reality is innately structured by the principle of hierarchy: everything is seen in terms of up and down, higher and lower. As a post-Einsteinian, Delany regards such a perspective as parochial, as derived from the localised conditions of gravity operant on planet Earth. Many major Western thinkers – Delany cites Marx, Freud and Einstein –

have criticised such limited and limiting gravitic value systems; science fiction, however, embodies this critique in its very discourse and thus does not merely provide the reader with a critique, but with an experiential knowledge of both gravitic systems and their alternatives. Delany's discussion of this procedure is worth quoting at length:

In science fiction, a rocket leaves the earth, rises up and up, higher and higher: at the initial stages, gravity asserts itself on all within. But then, once acceleration has pushed the vehicle past the seven miles per second escape velocity, then acceleration may cease: with its cessation comes the release of the gravitic effect, which is replaced by the weightless state, free-fall, in which all prior gravitic organisations become malleable, trivial, a mere cross section of the complex locus of current objective trajectories within the ship's confines. Space is that topos not organised by up and down, day or night. Light sources do not play it over a gradient transition of hues – there is no atmosphere to refract. Worlds, because they are so far away, can not constrain all effort into difficult ascents, easy descents, and equiposed horizontals. But soon – without any necessary change of direction – our ship approaches another world: its gravitic forces have been waxing all along as the prior world's were waning. And suddenly a point is reached where acceleration, to avoid collapse, incineration perhaps, or obliteration, must thrust against that gravitic force. And with that thrust, 'down' establishes itself in an entirely different direction, as does 'up'. And with that establishment, the absolute privilege of gravitic extension, previously allied to the infinite extension of number itself, is shattered. At this point, the reorganisations of free-fall in anticipation of this reversal, this shattering, are absolutely necessary for surviving it. For the very value matrix itself has become limited, liminal...; if these reorganisations are adequate, then a conceptual freedom is broached that the earth-bound consciousness has seldom been able to maintain for any length of

time. (Delany 1978: 184)

The interplanetary journey, which Delany sees as the defining characteristic of the science fiction genre (even in those texts where such a literal journey is absent), provides a metaphorical enactment of revolution. The narrative journey replaces the absolute gravide value system with a 'comparatively relative' 'cosmological matrix', 'where the two directions are not up and down but rather central and peripheral' (Delany, 1978: 184). The rocket's passage between worlds, like revolution, transports the reader from the world of limitation and stasis to a world of 'conceptual freedom' and possibility. The transitional period of 'the re-organisations of free-fall' resembles the revolutionary social transition: both are temporary conditions which result in the abolition of hierarchy and the generation of an alternative, fluid conceptual model of reality.

For Delany, the cosmological matrix – the fruit of the trope of the interplanetary journey – is definitive of science fiction. This matrix 'is not a mere rhetorical figure to be used or not used according to auctorial whim, but rather, through repetition, through inculcation, is part of the s-f discourse itself, intruding to recontour the meaning of all rhetoric the discursive gaze enfolds: that the text is science fiction is to say that it is discursively informed by that central/peripheral matrix' (Delany, 1978: 185). In other words, despite appearances to the contrary, the science fiction form is in itself, and despite ideological limitations at the level of content, revolutionary, and – one might even say – anarchistic.

The essays which follow do not necessarily make this point explicitly. But beneath their authors' sense that science fiction is worthy of investigation from an anarchist perspective or in anarchist terms, there is an implicit awareness that anarchism and science fiction possess a common revolutionary project.

JOHN MOORE

### *Reference*

Delany, Samuel R. 1978. *The American Shore: Meditations on a Tale of Science Fiction by Thomas M. Disch – 'Angouleme'*. Elizabethtown, New York: Dragon Press.

***The Living Theatre: Art, Exile and Outrage*** (Booknote, Volume 8, Number 1, March 2000)

John Tytell

London: Methuen Drama, 1997

ISBN 0-413-70800-4 (PB), £14.99.

Tytell's pioneering study of the Living Theatre provides an invaluable introduction to a disgracefully neglected aspect of modern theatre and contemporary anarchism. Information about the history and practice of this seminal theatre group has until now remained scant, and this is unfortunate both for scholars interested in anarchist aesthetics and for anarchist artists and activists who might elaborate the kind of projects initiated by the Living Theatre. The author, then, in reconstructing a history of the Living Theatre, has made a significant intervention and written an important text.

Inevitably, perhaps, Tytell's narrative focuses around the twin poles of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, the co-founders of the Living Theatre. Such an approach risks the creation of a cult of personality – a problematic issue for a theatre group committed to communal living and collective artistic production – but the author negotiates this difficulty well, or as well as he can given the evident personal charisma and dynamism of both Beck and Malina.

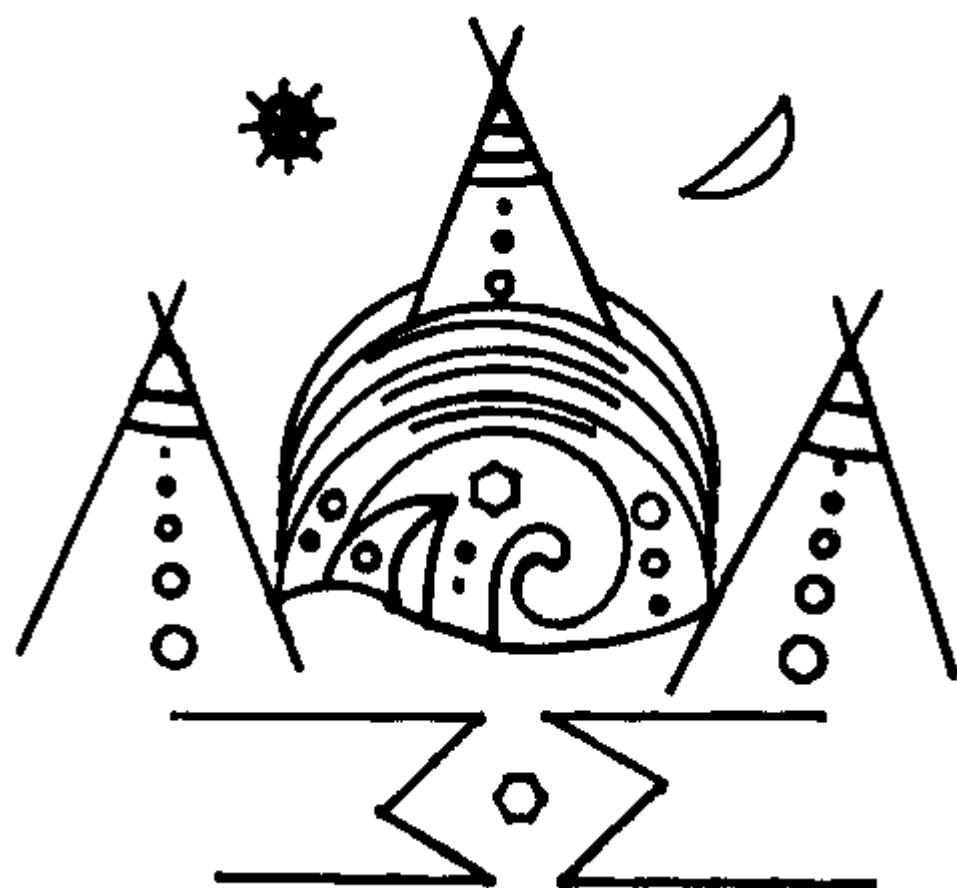
One major flaw, however, results from this approach. Tytell has essentially written a biography of the Living Theatre, starting with its genesis in the ideals and aspirations of Beck and Malina in the 1940s and following through its realisation and flowering from the 1960s onward. But because so much of the project's vitality is seen as the product of the charged relationship between its co-founders, once the chronicle reaches Beck's death in 1985, Tytell clearly regards the narrative as over. After dealing with Beck's demise, only one chapter of the book – a sketchy, unsatisfactory discussion of the Living Theatre post-1985 which lacks the detail of earlier chapters – remains. While the enormous creativity of the Beck-Malina partnership cannot be denied, this rushed conclusion is

unhelpful, as it reduces a communal project to the level of personalities, as well as undercutting the continuing vitality of the Living Theatre and the practices it developed.

In the end, however, this remains a minor quibble. Tytell has opened up an important area for investigation and intervention. An anarchist readership might have wished for more specificity regarding the ideological trajectory of the Living Theatre – the text is clearly written from a theatrical rather than a political perspective – but this book provides a platform from which further exploration can be launched.

I suppose it would be asking too much for Methuen Drama, the publishers of this volume, to reprint Living Theatre texts (especially *Paradise Now*, *Frankenstein* and *Mysteries*). In the wake of Tytell's text, republication of these titles would provide a wonderful impetus for further initiatives in this area.

JOHN MOORE  
University of Luton



**All Nietzscheans Now?** (Review Article, Volume 9, Number 1, March 2001)

*Nietzsche Contra Rousseau: A Study of Nietzsche's Moral and Political Thought*

Keith Ansell-Pearson

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991

ISBN 0-521-41173-4 (HB) £40.00/\$59.95; 0-521-57569-9 (PB)  
£13.95/\$18.95. 266 pp.

*Why We Are Not Nietzscheans*

Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut (Editors)

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997

ISBN 0-226-24480-6 (HB) £35.95/\$45.00; 0-226-24481-4 (PB)  
£12.75/\$15.95. 244 pp.

*The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's Zarathustra*

Stanley Rosen

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995

ISBN 0-521-49546-6 (HB) £37.50/\$59.95; 0-521-49889-9 (PB)  
£13.95/\$19.95. 261 pp.

In his rancorous polemic *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, Murray Bookchin rightly identifies Nietzsche as one of the major influences on some of the most vital anarchist thinking of our day, even though Bookchin libels this thought with the grab bag label of 'lifestylism'. This fact in itself should indicate that Nietzsche is worth investigation from an anarchist perspective. Unfortunately, the three titles under review here add relatively little to such a perspective. Many interpreters of Nietzsche – Bookchin is a good example – nostalgically try to locate an ideological coherence in the work of the German philosopher which is inappropriate in the case of an anti-systemic thinker. Lamentably, these three texts, to one degree or another, fall for this red herring.

There is no 'true meaning' to Nietzsche's work: Nietzsche indicated that the will to truth is in itself a sign of decadence. In *The Will to Power*, he suggests that there are no such things as facts (or truths), only interpretations – and this is certainly accurate of Nietzsche's work itself. Any interpretation of Nietzsche's *oeuvre* entails an act of appropriation, and as the philosopher himself indicated, the significance of any appropriation lies in the will to power which informs and motivates it. And this applies just as much to those appropriations which explicitly announce themselves as ideologically informed and those which purport to be concerned with discerning the 'real' meaning of Nietzsche's ideas.

The will to power energising *Why We Are Not Nietzscheans*, a collection of essays edited by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, remains all too evidently Oedipal in nature. The essays are authored by a generation of Frenchmen (and they are all male) who as students during the 1960s were taught a (post)structuralist version of Nietzsche by Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Althusser and Lacan. But now, in a period of neoconservatism, it is time for the Oedipal sons to settle the scores with their radical professor fathers by reasserting their allegiance to traditional values. As the cover blurb indicates, the contributors to the volume recommend an abandonment of 'the Nietzsche propped up as patron saint by French deconstructionists in order to return to reason', and 'seek to renew the Enlightenment quest for rationality'. The potentially useful project of reappropriating Nietzsche from and going *beyond* the deconstructionist status quo is replaced by the conservative project of retreating toward a discredited rationalist *rejection* of Nietzsche.

Testifying to an unexpected parochialism and insularity in French academia, the text's ideological perspectives are not difficult to locate. One contributor correctly identifies Nietzsche as one of 'the declared adversaries of democracy' and without a glimmer of irony refers approvingly and with a straight face to 'the task for democratic political thinking' (p. 154); another contributor feels no hesitation in declaring that 'we moderns, insofar as we are modern, are all "liberals" – whether we are in favor of liberalism or followers of some form of liberalism' (p. 167) and goes on to explain that 'if we feel we must defend democratic and

liberal ideas, we cannot call ourselves “Nietzschean,” merely as such and without any consequences’ (p. 202).

Although the various contributors agree to ‘think with Nietzsche against Nietzsche’, this is largely a superficial commitment. Writing from liberal democratic perspectives, the contributors are mostly concerned with defusing the threat represented by Nietzsche’s thought or rejecting it as essentially reactionary. Nietzsche *is* a problematic thinker: this cannot and should not be denied. But this text remains largely concerned with recuperation, with defending and retrenching the embattled position of liberal democracy.

Keith Ansell-Pearson’s *Nietzsche Contra Rousseau* is similarly written from a liberal democratic perspective. In the end, the author’s sympathies are more with Rousseau than Nietzsche. In his conclusion, he refers positively to ‘Rousseau’s vision of a democratic polity’ (p. 222) and affirms ‘the vision of a tragic, but courageous and compassionate democracy’ (p. 223). But Ansell-Pearson’s reading of Nietzsche is more insightful and less defensive than that of his French counterparts. And this despite the fact that he has little or no conception of anarchism, using the term merely in a pejorative, Hobbesian sense of the term (pp. 79, 104).

Ansell-Pearson’s discussion is valuable because he focusses his analysis of Rousseau and Nietzsche on the issue of civilisation: “To be heirs of the writings of Rousseau and Nietzsche is to be the inheritors of the most powerful and disturbing critiques of civilization that the modern period has produced’ (p. 1). And although in the end, from a liberal democratic perspective, Ansell-Pearson blunts the force of those critiques, the points thrown up in the course of the discussion are significant.

The consideration of Rousseau is useful inasmuch as it actually takes the trouble to investigate what the French philosopher had to say about civilisation and the primitive, rather than bandying around uninvestigated commonplaces about Rousseau’s positing of the noble savage and the desirability of a return to nature. Rousseau’s actual commitment to a constitutional monarchy and social hierarchy is well documented by Ansell-Pearson and will come as a surprise to those who automatically assume that there are compatibilities between Rousseau and primitivist

anarchist projects. And despite the author's ultimate affirmation of Rousseau's democratic polity, there is a pertinent discussion of the totalitarian implications of the Rousseauvian general will.

The examination of Nietzsche's politics benefits from the contrast with Rousseau, but also from being situated in the context of debates around civilisation. As Ansell-Pearson maintains: 'Nietzsche's own politics are best understood, I would argue, in the context of his preoccupation with the problem of civilization and the paradoxes which result from his thinking on this problem' (p. 200). The author's formulations on this issue are worth quoting at length:

While drawing attention to the fundamental difference between Rousseau and Nietzsche in their conceptions of the problem of civilization, this study has also shown that it is possible to locate a common problem at the centre of their thinking on the formation and deformation of the human animal, namely, the problem of history. If man [*sic!*] has become a social and political animal through the historical labour of culture, but this process of development has resulted in a corrupt and degenerate civilization, then the question arises – still appreciating the fact that the way in which each construes the meaning and significance of this corruption and degeneration is quite different – as to how humanity is to undergo a process of transfiguration and learn the meaning of its self-overcoming, (p. 206)

The issue identified here is one that is central to contemporary anarchism, and both Rousseau but particularly Nietzsche have valuable insights to contribute to anarchist responses to this problem. This is not to suggest that anarchists should become Nietzscheans, but rather that the Nietzschean critique needs to be critically investigated, appropriated and utilised as appropriate. Ansell-Pearson's study, despite its ideological limitations, provides some insights as to some of the dimensions of the Nietzschean critique which might be fruitful for an anarchist perspective.

Stanley Rosen's *The Mask of Enlightenment* is less useful on this score.

A resolutely apolitical interpretation of Nietzsche – in this case a close reading of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* – provides yet another pretext for liberal fulmination. Rosen concludes his study by averring: ‘The decisive problem for the next philosophical generation is to separate justice from pity and shame. This will not be possible without a reconstitution of reason that enables us to perceive once more the common root of truth and goodness. That root was once known as philosophy. Nietzsche bears a heavy burden of guilt for the radical deterioration in the second half of the twentieth century of our understanding of philosophy...’ (p. 250). The fact that Nietzsche has radically questioned categories such as justice, truth and goodness is swept aside, and once again the eternal rationalist verities supposedly underlining liberal democracy are asserted. Such a limited ideological perspective qualifies the occasional insights into *Zarathustra* which pepper Rosen’s book.

Bookchin’s defence of Enlightenment rationalism against Nietzsche and post-leftist anarchy neatly complements the liberal democratic defence of rationalism against Nietzsche in the three books considered here. In these neoconservative times, the bulwarks of tradition and retrenchment are being recemented brick by brick.

JOHN MOORE  
University of Luton

## **The Insubordination of Words: Poetry, Insurgency and the Situationists** (Volume 10, Number 2)

### **I. ART**

Situationist formulations on art provide the starting point for much contemporary anarchist thinking on aesthetics. But these formulations, so often taken for granted by writers on this topic, can themselves be subject to critical interrogation. Such a project remains important if anarchist practice in this crucial area is to undergo regeneration and renewal.

Various situationist methods and modes of activity were identified during the 1950s, including principally *détournement* (or "diversion" or "plagiarism," *"Short for: détournement of pre-existing aesthetic elements. The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu"*) and the *dérive* (or "drifting," *"A mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances"*). Some attention will be given to the latter, but in the present context it is the former that remains of primary importance.

Like the dadaists and the surrealists before them, the situationists cite Lautréamont as their inspiration for the practice of *détournement*, and in particular continually quote the famous passages from the poet's *Poésies*, which assert that plagiarism is necessary, progress implies it, and that poetry must be made, not by one, but by all. In a pre-situationist essay of 1956 significantly entitled "Methods of *Détournement*," Debord and Wolman admiringly quote these very slogans and indicate that Lautréamont's use of *détournement* is *"far ahead of its time"* and consequently his advances *"in this direction [are] still partly misunderstood even by his most ostentatious admirers."*

In *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Vaneigem also affirms the significance of Lautréamont's practice of plundering the cultural storehouses of the past and *détourning* the materials found there: *"I have never claimed to have anything new to say . . . Ever since men [sic] grew up and learned to read Lautréamont, everything has been said and yet few*

*have taken advantage of it."* But the ultimate, exemplary tribute to the French poet occurs in section 207 of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, which consists entirely of a condensed and détourned appropriation of the key passages from *Poésies*:

*Ideas improve. The meaning of words participates in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author's phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, and replaces it with the right idea.*

In the following section, Debord explains the significance of Lautréamont's détournement/plagiarism/diversion for situationist practice: Diversion is the opposite of quotation, of the theoretical authority which is always falsified by the mere fate of having become a quotation — a fragment torn from its context, from its movement, and ultimately from the global framework of its epoch and from the precise choice, whether exactly recognized or erroneous, which it was in this framework. Diversion is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It appears in communication which knows it cannot pretend to guarantee anything definitively and in itself. At its peak, it is language which cannot be confirmed by any former or supra-critical reference. On the contrary, its own coherence, in itself and with the applicable facts, can confirm the former core of truth which it brings out. Diversion has grounded its cause on nothing external to its own truth as present critique.

Détournement emerges as a technique which simultaneously negates theoretical authority and falsification and affirms a counter-language of anti-ideology. Negating the foundational textual authority of prior utterances, it rewrites those utterances but can only justify its rewriting on the grounds of its own self-defined critical truth. Exemplifying its own procedures, the closing assertion of the passage clinches the argument by détourning the opening (and closing) line of Stirner's *The Ego and its Own*, in turn a détournement of the first line of Goethe's poem "Vanitas, Vanitatum Vanitas!," a poem with a title that in turn is a détournement of the scriptural "Vanity! All is vanity!"

If such a vertiginous procedure seems reminiscent of the endless deferrals

of meaning characteristic of Derridean *différance* or the Kristevan web of intertextuality, this is not coincidental. Like the deconstructionists, the situationists, far from escaping from the trap of postmodernity, in many ways become definitive and characteristic of it. Like many postmodernists, the situationists maintain a problematic but generally hostile attitude toward modernism and modernity, largely seeking to differentiate and dissociate themselves from it. By claiming that he has nothing new to say and that everything has already been said, Vaneigem distances himself from the modernist emphasis on newness and innovation. As the entire technique of *détournement* suggests, Debord and Wolman are similarly uninterested in creating the new, suggesting merely that " *The literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda purposes.*" At the same time, however, they stress the need to go beyond the (modernist) practice of scandal:

*Since the negation of the bourgeois conception of art and artistic genius has become pretty much old hat, [Duchamp's] drawing of a moustache on the Mona Lisa is no more interesting than the original version of that painting.*

Modernist techniques of negation have become old hat, even when they involve a "primitive" form of *détournement*: " *In a more primitive sense, *détournement* within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which testifies to the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres,*" and as a result, " *We must now push this process to the point of negating the negation.*" Paradoxically, however, this negation of the modernist negation of the premodern comprises, at another level, a reassertion of the modernist emphasis on the new: " *Only extremist innovation is historically justified.*" But the innovation occurs only at the level of technique: the material to be worked upon is the already existing " *literary and artistic*" — to which should be added philosophical and political — " *heritage of humanity.*" (And even here claims to technical innovation are dubious: can a technique pioneered in 1870 and subsequently utilized, albeit in primitive forms, by dadaists, surrealists, and others throughout the modernist period really be described as

innovative, let alone as an instance of "extremist innovation"?)

As might be expected, the initial result of *détournement* remains parodic, and here another point of congruence might be drawn between the situationist emphases on parody and the postmodernist valorization of pastiche. The situationists, however, see parody as merely a preliminary stage in the deployment of *détournement* techniques, rather than as an end in itself:

*It is therefore necessary to conceive of a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of détourned elements, far from arousing indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity.*

Ultimately, the original text is to be transcended, forgotten, effaced, rather than merely written over as in the typical postmodern palimpsest. The envisaged effect is a rather incongruous Romantic sublime, but this loose formulation is considerably tightened in the anonymous 1959 essay "Détournement as Negation and Prelude:"

*The two fundamental laws of détournement are the loss of importance of each detourned autonomous element — which may go so far as to lose its original sense completely — and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect. . . . Détournement is thus first of all a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression . . . . But at the same time, the attempts to reuse the 'detournable bloc' as material for other ensembles express the search for a vaster construction, a new genre of creation at a higher level.*

As the essay's title indicates, *détournement* is conceived as both negation and prelude — not, it should be noted, as negation and affirmation. Existing structures of meaning are to be dismantled, and through the collision, juxtaposition and collocation of the liberated autonomous elements, a new ensemble of meanings is assembled which confers fresh

significance on the resulting semantic permutations. Détournement thus provides a model for artistic expressivity, but also for social transformation, and in this respect it remains merely a prelude to vaster acts of reconstruction, to the "new genre of creation" that is the liberation and free construction of daily life.

In this process, however, art itself is to be suppressed and realized. Détournement displaces, effaces and supplants previous organizations of meaning: this constitutes its negatory aspect. But these transformations of meaning are only a prelude, they merely point the way to and enable social transformation. They are a means, not an end in themselves. But further, in the course of social transformation, art itself is superseded. In his Preface to the fourth Italian edition of *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord charts the origins of situationist practice and recalls that in 1952 four or five people from Paris decided to search for the supersession of art. It appeared then, by a fortunate consequence of a daring advance on this path, that the previous defense lines which had smashed the previous offensives of the social revolution found themselves outflanked and overturned.

The chance to launch another one was then discovered. The supersession of art is the 'North West Passage' of the geography of real life which had so often been sought for more than a century. The supersession, or suppression and realization, of art is thus accorded a pivotal position within situationist intervention: it constitutes the one and only route to contemporary social revolution. Through the suppression and realization of art, radical social transformation and the free reconstruction of daily life become possible.

The quest to effect the supersession of art as part of a project for social renewal is not, however, original to the situationists. In *The Rebel*, a study of Western rebellion from Romanticism onward, Albert Camus locates the rejection of art as part of the process of deformation through which authentic rebellion degenerates into authoritarian revolutionism. Camus recognizes this impulse in figures as diverse as Rousseau, Saint-Just, Saint-Simon, the Russian nihilists, and (most importantly in the present

context) Hegel and the Left Hegelians, including Marx. Debord's biographer, Len Bracken, characterizes Hegel as "*one of Debord's leading lights.*" If anything, this is an understatement: Debord's work is permeated with Hegelian thought and in particular Hegelian notions of history. Hegel conceives of history as a realm of alienation characterized by the disjunctions of the subject/object duality. But history is also dynamic, a process embodied in the historical dialectic in which clashes between contradictory forces result in historical development. The dialectical process results in a series of moments of supersession (or *aufhebung*). These moments are not occasions of pure transcendence, but moments in which a previous condition is overcome and yet simultaneously preserved, but taken to a higher level—in short, suppressed and realized.

In Hegel's thought, this process continues until the lower, physical elements of life are superseded and humanity reaches the historical/spiritual goal of Absolute Mind. At this juncture, all oppositions are resolved, including the alienations resulting from the subject-object split, and history comes to an end. As might be anticipated, the achievement of such a goal renders disciplines such as religion, philosophy and (most importantly in the current context) art superfluous. As Bracken explains,

*For Hegel, once Absolute Mind is attained, art is no longer necessary. When historical time invades the artistic sphere, historical time introduces the principle of the necessary dissolution of art. At this stage art loses its place in life as a means to authentic truth, and is no longer satisfying. Real needs and interests displace art in the sphere of representation because in order to satisfy these needs and interests, an individual's reflective capacity is full of thought and abstract representations far removed from art.*

Or, as Camus more succinctly phrases it: "*According to the revolutionary interpreters of [Hegel's] Phenomenology there will be no art in reconciled society. Beauty will be lived and no longer only imagined. Reality, become entirely rational, will satisfy, completely on its own, every form of desire.*"

Suitably inflected and modified in the light of the young Marx, this is the philosophical basis of the situationist demand for the supersession of art. In this schema, art is consigned to a secondary realm, the realm of mere representation or the imaginary, and rendered subordinate to supposedly real needs. This surrender of the pleasure principle to the reality principle, cast in the guise of resolving the duality through supersession, is criticized by Camus when he suggests that the conflict over the status of art expresses:

*on the aesthetic level, the struggle, already described, between revolution and rebellion. In every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it and the construction of a substitute universe. Rebellion, from this point of view, is a fabricator of universes. This also defines art. The demands of rebellion are really, in part, aesthetic demands.*

Rebellion and art, for Camus, converge on the common project of fabricating universes. But *détournement*, the central situationist technique for aesthetic and social supersession, is not about fabrication, but prefabrication — the reuse of preexisting, prefabricated artistic elements in a new ensemble. Everything has already been said and there is nothing new left to say, as Vaneigem makes plain: "*The only true new thing here is the direction of the stream carrying commonplaces along.*" The situationists do not escape the banality of the world which they rightly criticize. Like Maxwell's Demon, eternally sorting molecules, situationist post-artistic practice resolves itself merely to generating new configurations of the detritus of existing socio-aesthetic practice.

*Détournement*, as the situationists readily admit, is a technique of negation, and as such is insufficient, all too liable to recuperation as postmodern nihilism. But their Hegelian philosophical underpinnings will not allow them to pose an affirmative role for any kind of creative art, even one which attempts to avoid spectacular commodification and participates in the oppositional movement. *Détournement* can only be a prelude — a prelude to a time in which the free reconstruction of daily life subsumes and supplants artistic creativity. In the 1961 essay "For a

Revolutionary Judgment of Art," Debord avers that "*Revolution is not 'showing' life to people, but making them live.*" On one level, this sentiment contains some truth: it is true (as Debord points out elsewhere in the essay) that art is based on a division of labor and casts the spectator in a relatively passive role, and thus that art as it is currently practiced is not revolutionary. But the statement contains further implications. First, Debord is implying that revolution does not involve any degree of reflection, but is purely a matter of action (and the use of the active verb "making" in the phrase "making them live," with its overtones of coercion, reinforces this sense). Second, the statement implies that if revolution is not about "*'showing' life to people,*" then art certainly is. This implication betrays a tacit belief that art is essentially mimetic, as if all art is mere realism — a belief which is disingenuous and which Debord himself knew to be untrue.

Why then this "*hostility to art*" and imaginative creativity, which Camus sees as characteristic of "*all revolutionary reformers*" (as opposed to authentic rebels), on the part of the situationists? As the remainder of this essay will indicate, this hostility can be traced to a psychological anxiety — partly an anxiety of influence but largely an anxiety regarding the threats to rationality and rational control posed by the irrational and which art can on occasion evoke.

Committed to rationality and the real through their Hegelianism and Marxist materialism, situationist discourses are cast in the familiar sorcerer's apprentice role of invoking dangerous forces to effect certain ends and then attempting to master them through the imposition of rational controls. Hence, perhaps, the contrast between *détournement* and the *dérive*. The former seeks the supersession of art in favor of the real and in doing so negates not merely the aesthetic but also those irrational forces which threaten the fetishized realm of "the real." The latter evokes psychological responses through its use of psychogeographic techniques to explore the intersections between individual sensibility and urban spaces, but once again the imaginary is banished and subordinated to the world of the real. "*The spectacle,*" Debord asserts, "*inverts the real.*" But

in situationist discourse the fetishized, reified notion of the real becomes merely a subset of the spectacle.

The fact remains that those explosions of free creativity, in whatever form they may take, that are characteristic of rebellion, are limited and rendered subordinate by demands for the supersession of the creative arts. The point here is not to reinscribe discredited bourgeois notions of the creative genius, nor to reinvigorate the exhausted projects of modernism, nor to suggest that art as it is currently practiced is in any way redeemable. But neither is it to reaffirm with blind faith the strictures of the situationist creed. The aim is to expose the psychology underlying the situationist project and indicate ways in which anarchist practice might benefit from a post-situationist trajectory. Further investigation indicates, however, that situationist ideology is itself a site for contestation, and that out of its contradictions can be discerned a possibility for creative practice which is both negatory and affirmative.

## 2. POETRY

At the heart of the situationist repudiation of art — even as a means of social transformation — can be discerned a renunciation of individual subjectivity and creativity. In his 1959 film *On the passage of a few persons through a rather brief period of time*, Debord has one of the film's voices launch an attack on the notion of director as auteur:

*There are now people who flatter themselves that they are authors of films, as others were authors of novels. They are even more backward than the novelists because they are ignorant of the decomposition and exhaustion of individual expression in our time, ignorant of the end of the arts of passivity . . . The only interesting venture is the liberation of everyday life, not only in the perspectives of history but for us and right away. This entails the withering away of alienated forms of communication.*

The "decomposition and exhaustion of individual expression" is not only taken for granted, but unproblematically equated with "the arts of passivity" and "alienated forms of communication." The assertion of the

failure of individual expressivity is unproven but also unlamented. The necessity of overcoming passivity and alienation remains indisputable, but the notion that individual expressivity might have a role in achieving these ends remains foreign to Debord. The liberation of everyday life remains a crucial goal, but as this phrase implies, it is not individuals but the abstraction everyday life that is to be liberated, and the participation of individual creativity is not required in such a collectivist project.

Debord repudiates individual creativity because of his belief in "*the scandalous poverty of the subject*." As the narrator of his 1961 film *Critique of Separation* indicates:

*The events that happen in individual existence as it is organized, the events that really concern us and require our participation, are generally precisely those that merit nothing more than our being distant, bored, indifferent spectators. In the insubordination of words contrast, the situation that is seen in some artistic transposition is rather often attractive, something that would merit our participating in it. This is a paradox to reverse, to put back on its feet. This is what must be realized in acts.*

Life in spectacularized society remains so impoverished that everyday events seem dull and meaningless, whereas the lives represented in some works of art seem more inviting, interesting and engaging in comparison. It is as if the magic of daily life has been siphoned off and contained in the specialized realm of art. Debord proposes reversing this state of affairs. This seems a sensible project, but he does not envisage any role for art in achieving this end. Rather, he fetishizes action at the expense of art, as if the two were necessarily incompatible and not complementary — or integral — modes of practice. It is true that art — in order to participate in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* — would need to devise ways to avoid spectacularization and commodification and to fend off alienation and passivity in order to achieve genuine communication. But Debord does not envisage such a possibility because for him art is tied to the "miserable subjectivity" of the spectacularized individual, whose immiseration and

emptiness render her imaginatively and creatively impoverished. For a collectivist such as Debord, only the abstraction of the collectivity (the masses, the proletariat) — not the individual — remains capable of effecting social transformation, and only then through action, not free creativity.

For Debord, the wellsprings of individual creativity have dried-up in the drought that is spectacularization. In *Critique of Separation*, the narrator talks about dreams:

*What cannot be forgotten reappears in dreams. At the end of this type of dream, half asleep, the events are still for a brief moment taken as real. And the reactions they give rise to become clearer, more distinct, more reasonable; like so many mornings, the memory of what one drank the night before. Then comes the awareness that it's all false, that 'it was only a dream', that there are no new realities and no going back to it. Nothing you can hold on to. These dreams are flashes from the unresolved past. They unilaterally illuminate moments previously lived in confusion and doubt. They strikingly publicize those of our needs that have not been answered. Here is daylight, and here are perspectives that no longer mean anything.*

While it is true that Debord recognizes that there are other types of dream apart from 'this type of dream', this is the only kind that he considers. The dream has both a subjective effect in that it conjures up images from the past and a politicized element as it reveals "*those of our needs that have not been answered.*" But the overall response is one of sadness and disgust: the dream is unreal, false, an illusion. There are no new realities: the dream of a transfigured world is just a mirage, and the dreamer is left with a sense of loss and of being swindled.

The unconscious is not regarded as a fund of creativity full of subjective and social significance, and replete with materials of use for the transformation of everyday life. On the contrary, the products of the unconscious are regarded as banal and illusory. This is the basis of Debord's critique of surrealism. In his 1957 "Report on the Construction

of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action," he admits that "*The surrealist program, asserting the sovereignty of desire and surprise, proposing a new use of life, is much richer in constructive possibilities than is generally thought.*" However, he proceeds to remark,

*The error that is at the root of surrealism is the idea of the infinite richness of the unconscious imagination. The cause of the ideological failure of surrealism was its belief that the unconscious was the finally discovered ultimate force of life, and its having revised the history of ideas accordingly and stopped it there. We know now that the unconscious imagination is poor, that automatic writing is monotonous, and that the whole genre of ostentatious surrealist 'weirdness' has ceased to be very surprising.*

Instead of richness in the unconscious, Debord finds poverty — an impoverishment that matches "the scandalous poverty of the subject" identified in Critique of Separation. Subjectivity and imagination are dull, empty, poor, and therefore the irrational forces at the root of both are inappropriate to the project of social transformation. On the contrary, 'It is necessary to go further and rationalize the world more — the first condition for impassioning it'.

The contradictions of this paradox are never resolved, but further, given the perceived impoverishment and immiseration of the subject, it remains difficult to see from where such impassionment might arise.

One answer, both to this specific problem and to the more general issue of art and *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, emerges in situationist considerations of language. The situationists are aware of the centrality of language to the project of social transformation. The 1963 essay "All the King's Men" opens with the statement:

*The problem of language is at the heart of all struggles between the forces striving to abolish present alienation and those striving to maintain it; it is inseparable from the entire terrain of those*

*struggles.*

Language, for the situationists, is a site for contestation and a struggle over meaning. But, as this passage indicates, the binarist mode of perception characteristic of situationist thought leads to a simplistic distinction between authentic and inauthentic, superficiality and profundity.

For example, in the 1963 essay "Basic Banalities;" Vaneigem locates the situationist

*position on the ill-defined and shifting frontier where language captured by power (conditioning) and free language (poetry) fight out their infinitely complex war.*

Mustapha Khayati, in the significantly titled 1966 essay "Captive Words," similarly considers the necessity of liberating those words which have been captured by power. These captive words form a deceptive web of lies which overlays the underlying truths of lived experience:

*It is impossible to get rid of a world without getting rid of the language that conceals and protects it, without laying bare its true nature.*

Hence, although articulated in the words of "the dominant organization of life;" the critique of that world develops into "a different language:"

*Every revolutionary theory has had to invent its own terms, to destroy the dominant sense of other terms and establish new meanings in the 'world of meanings' corresponding to the new embryonic reality needing to be liberated from the dominant trash heap'.*

Détournement makes its appearance in situationist theory at this juncture because it becomes the primary means of destroying old meanings and establishing new ones in their place.

*Détournement, which Lautréamont called plagiarism, confirms the thesis, long demonstrated by modern art, of the insubordination of words, of the impossibility for power to totally*

*recuperate created meanings, to fix an existing meaning once and for all.*

This is a crucial moment in situationist theory because it opens up a vertiginous perspective, but one that aids in discerning a post-situationist trajectory. Khayati identifies *détournement* as a confirmation of the insubordination of words — of the impossibility of attributing fixed definitions to words, but also of the refusal of words to remain obedient and controlled. But another possibility opens up here: the possibility that *détournement*, rather than a confirmation, is in actuality a form of managing the insurgency of words to the benefit of a post-capitalist ideological regime.

From this perspective, *détournement* can be characterized as a form of crisis management: acknowledging the instability and historical relativity of meanings, it does not attempt the impossible task of establishing fixed definitions; rather, under the guise of unleashing subversive meanings, it actually controls words by ordering them in rationalist configurations. "All the King's Men" points out:

*Regarding the use of words, Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty quite correctly observes, "The question is which is to be master — that's all."*

Words — which 'coexist with power in a relationship analogous to that which proletarians . . . have with power' — need to be mastered in some fashion. Not surprisingly, then, the essay ends with the statement: "*Our era no longer has to write out poetic orders; it has to carry them out.*" The reification and mystification of the phrase "our era" aside, the imagery of issuing and executing orders clearly indicates the situationist failure to escape the ideology of power.

"All the King's Men" refers to *the phenomenon of the insubordination of words, their desertion,*

*their open resistance, which is manifested in all modern writing*  
*and is "a symptom of the general revolutionary crisis.*

The situationists, having failed to move fully beyond leftism, attempt to

manage this crisis and channel it toward a discredited councilist regime. But in doing so they risk words (like the proletarians to whom words are compared) engaging in insubordination, desertion and open resistance against them. And it is this, quite rightly, that they fear. Words "*embody forces that can upset the most careful calculations*" — including those of the situationists themselves. Calculations are, of course, rational procedures and as such can be named. But the forces embodied in words are non-rational and thus cannot be named, cannot even be allowed to make a fleeting appearance, in the discourse of rationality.

"All the King's Men" notes that "*The quest for unambiguous signals . . . is . . . clearly linked with existing power.*" But the situationists themselves remain hostile toward semiotic ambiguity and particularly ambiguity in language. In doing so, they reveal their rationalist commitments and come perilously close to aligning themselves with power. Considering the illusion of social unity created by myth, "Basic Banalities" asserts,

*This universally dominant factitious unity attains its most tangible and concrete representation in communication, particularly in language. Ambiguity is most manifest at this level, it leads to an absence of real communication, it puts the analyst at the mercy of ridiculous phantoms, at the mercy of words — eternal and unchanging instants — whose content varies according to who pronounces them, as does the notion of sacrifice. When language is put to the test, it can no longer dissimulate the misrepresentation and thus it provokes the crisis of participation. In the language of the era one can follow the traces of total revolution, unfulfilled but always imminent. They are the exalting and terrifying signs of the upheavals they foreshadow, but who takes them seriously? The discredit striking language is as deeply rooted and instinctive as the suspicion with which myths are viewed by people who at the same time remain firmly attached to them. How can key words be defined by other words? How can phrases be used to point out the signs that refute the phraseological organization of appearance? The best*

*texts still await their justification. When a poem by Mallarmé becomes the sole explanation for an act of revolt, then poetry and revolution will have overcome their ambiguity. To await and prepare for this moment is to manipulate information not as the last shock wave whose significance escapes everyone, but as the first repercussion of an act still to come.*

Ambiguity is assailed because it impedes real communication and places the individual at the mercy of words. By implication, according to the situationists, words — and hence meanings too — should be subject to mastery, in part because only mastery of words makes real communication possible. The clarity and stability of meanings characteristic of French classicism are key values here. But words and meanings, it seems, remain slippery, uncontrollable, insubordinate. Language has to be 'put to the test' in order to resolve its troubling ambiguities, which for the situationists remains tantamount to exposing the traces of total revolution that remain veiled in the ambiguities of language. Due to their ambiguity, words have fallen into general discredit and this results in a semantic collapse wherein issues of definition become problematic if not impossible, language becomes inadequate to the task of creating clarity about the sociohistorical situation, and the signs of the forthcoming social upheaval are not perceived or taken seriously.

As a result of this line of argument, the situationists maintain that words — and more particularly the words of art — need to justify and hence redeem themselves by casting off and resolving their ambiguity in the crucible of revolutionary activity: "*When a poem by Mallarmé becomes the sole explanation for an act of revolt, then poetry and revolution will have overcome their ambiguity.*" The notion of a Mallarmé text acting as impetus and explanation for an act of revolt is a fine one because it locates a fundamental role for words and the discourses of art in the creation of radical social transformation — indeed in a gesture of scandalous gratuitousness it assigns the poem as a self-sufficient cause of such transformation. However, the subsequent assertion that poetry needs to overcome the ambiguity of its meanings and requires justification in terms

of revolutionary activism, relegates the discourse of art to a purely utilitarian function. The rationalist project of control through stabilizing and containing meanings, and through banishing ambiguity or multiple levels of meaning, becomes all too apparent at this juncture.

All language — and not just the language of power or captive words — is regarded as discredited and suspicious unless it has a unitary meaning and remains directly useful to the project of social transformation. Khayati maintains in "Captive Words" that " *We propose the real liberation of language because we propose to put it in a practice free of all constraints.*" Unfortunately, however, the constraints from which language is to be liberated appear to include those very elements which provide the discourses of art with their subversive potential, notably the capacity to generate meanings which elude containment and control. Perhaps Khayati should have heeded the warning from history by which situationists habitually set so much store:

*The insubordination of words, during the experimental phase from Rimbaud to the surrealists, has shown that the theoretical critique of the world of power is inseparable from a practice that destroys it.*

The situationists are not exempt from this entropic process: their " *theoretical critique of the world of power*" is recuperated as soon as they attempt to manage the insubordination of words, even though they do so in the name of liberating language.

The phenomenon of linguistic insubordination reveals two important issues. First it indicates that the language of ideology, and this includes 'the fluid language of anti-ideology', is rent with contradictions. Meanings refuse containment and cohesion. Derrida has pointed to the presence of aporia, moments of contradiction which expose the failure of ideological coherence, in every text. Such a debunking process seems less important than the presence of rogue meanings within texts: those moments when words refuse the semantic order within which they are located, when in an excess of energy meanings overflow their boundaries and take us with them into new and perhaps unknown territories, first in the realm of the

imaginary but then in the world of everyday life. (Vaneigem acknowledges the significance of such moments for revolutionary practice when he notes that *...those who reject all hierarchical power can use any word as a weapon to punctuate their action. Lautréamont and the illegalist anarchists were already aware of this; so were the dadaists.*")

Second, it indicates the presence of the unconscious in texts. The situationists deny the significance of the unconscious, in part because of their commitment to rationalism and unitary meanings, both of which are threatened by eruptions of the irrational, or what the surrealists call 'the marvelous'. But the phenomenon of the insubordination of words renders this denial futile: their attempt to manage the liberation of language merely casts them in the role of King Canute, impotently trying to quell the floodtide of unconscious meanings which threaten to drown their would-be master.

This failure to halt the rising tide of contradictions and rogue or unconscious meanings remains in the long term, however, a fortunate one, because it allows us post-situationists to redeem the situationists from their worst excesses, to negate their negation in a way that one would hope they might appreciate. The route to this redemption lies through the relatively marginalized notion of poetry in situationist discourse.

"All the King's Men" draws a rough distinction between "old poetry" or "the poetry of the past" and "the new poetry." The former terms denote the conventional understanding of poetry. The latter constitutes what Vaneigem will later refer to in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* as "lived poetry." Détournement is refreshingly restricted to the ancillary role of revivifying poetry in the conventional sense of the term (or what Vaneigem calls "poetry (in the narrow sense)"). Such a move opens the possibility for poetry — i.e., the new poetry — to assume a new, post-artistic role, but one which nevertheless preserves a role for creative practice in the process of *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. "All the King's Men" defines poetry in this new sense of the term as *"the revolutionary moment of language"* and maintains that *"It is a matter not of putting poetry at the service of the revolution, but rather of putting revolution at*

*the service of poetry."*

Art and poetry are thus positioned as antagonistic forces, a point confirmed in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* when Vaneigem avers: "Most art works betray poetry. How could it be otherwise, when poetry and power are irreconcilable?" Art and power are pitted over and against poetry and revolution. The supersession of art is to result in the realization of poetry. But poetry in this sense

*must be understood as immediate communication within reality and as real alteration of this reality. It is nothing other than liberated language, language recovering its richness, language which breaks its rigid significations and simultaneously embraces words, music, cries, gestures, painting, mathematics, facts, acts.*

Poetry in the situationist sense, then, encompasses forms of practice that are artistic (e.g. , music, painting) or expressive (cries, gestures) as well as words and forms of revolutionary action.

At first glance such a conception of poetry might seem reminiscent of the Wagnerian gesamtkunstwerk or the Artaudian theatre of cruelty, but as *The Revolution of Everyday Life* indicates, the inspiration appears to have a different origin: 'The African work of art — poem, music, sculpture, mask — is not considered complete until it has become a form of speech, a word-in-action, a creative element which functions'. This statement holds important implications for the role of creative practice in the revolution of everyday life. Art is in part rejected by the situationists because of its participation in the organization of passivity. But poetry of the kind embodied in the African artwork, far from maintaining social passivity, forges direct links between creative act and social activity.

Although undeveloped, such a revised conception of poetry carries the clear implication that creative practice remains an integral part of the revolution of everyday life. The supersession of art does not entail the abolition of aesthetic creativity, nor does it necessarily consist merely of acts of negation such as détournement. The situationist notion of poetry

opens the possibility for new forms of affirmative aesthetic intervention and insurgent creativity. Vaneigem refers in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* to "the scandal of free and total creativity" — a creativity that is scandalous because it refuses all constraints placed upon it, including those managerialist constraints envisaged by the situationists themselves:

*Man [sic] is in a state of creativity twenty-four hours a day. Once revealed, the scheming use of freedom by the mechanisms of domination produces a backlash in the form of an idea of authentic freedom inseparably bound up with individual creativity ... Spontaneity is the mode of existence of creativity: not an isolated state, but the unmediated experience of subjectivity. Spontaneity concretizes the passion for creation and is the first moment of its practical realization: the precondition of poetry, of the impulse to change the world in accordance with the demands of radical subjectivity.*

In contrast to Debord's notion of miserable subjectivity and consequent failure of individual expressivity, Vaneigem regards subjectivity as characterized by an abundance of creativity and expressivity. Further, Vaneigem denies Debord's emphasis on rational controls by stressing the inseparability of creativity and spontaneity — a move which opens up once again the links between the unconscious, the creative imagination and radical social transformation. Creativity, Vaneigem maintains, is a "revolutionary force."

The "new creators" — as Vaneigem calls the practitioners of poetry in the situationist sense — are precisely that: creators, but also creators of the new. They are not restricted to shifting through the detritus of existing culture in order to plagiarize and détourne those materials — although such procedures might play a limited, secondary role in their practice. First and foremost they are creators, poets, imaginers and insurgents. The liberation of language remains one of their aims, but once it is liberated, language must be allowed to express the meanings generated spontaneously by the creative imagination. Liberation, unlike in the case of occupied Europe, does not mean the replacement of one regime by

another. Liberation, in other words, does not mean subordination. Revolution is an act of permanent insubordination, and *The Revolution of Everyday Life* will not become an actuality until recognized as a necessary condition. The new creators, those who embody and express the scandal of free and total creativity in words and words-in-action, have a vital role to play in creating a poetry of insurgency that will inform and shape *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.

**FESTIVE TURBULENCE** (Volume 11, Number 1, 2003)  
**(A CELEBRATION OF THE TENTH  
ANNIVERSARY  
OF *ANARCHIST STUDIES*)**

JOHN MOORE

Woken  
by an echo  
of a sound  
never made

brazen fanfares blare

in falling cathedrals  
and collapsing citadels

announcing  
festive turbulence  
and convulsive harmony

opening possibility  
for renewal recovery  
and revisioning  
anarchy unbound



# **Contributions to *Anarchist Studies***

Introduced by Jonathan Purkis

*If anarchist art is to leap beyond the boundaries of its textuality and change reality, then it cannot attempt to mimic that reality through verisimilitude. If representation is anathema to anarchists in socio-political terms, it is equally antithetical in artistic terms, and for broadly similar reasons. Artistic representation encodes power relations within the subject, between subjects, and between subject and object. The anarchist project of abolishing control structures remains incompatible with such forms of artistic representation. Hence the need to develop anarchist aesthetics that are characterised by a radical refusal of power.*